





THE CHRONICLE OF A CAMERA

BY
PAUL INGELOW

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"THE CHRONICLE OF A CAMERA."



P. 286.—“Just the place!” he ejaculated. “I’ll hide the body in the cellar.”

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THE CHRONICLE OF A CAMERA.

CHAPTER I.

THE HOUR AND THE MAN.

“HARK!”

A tempest of summer rain had been sweeping hill, valley and dale.

Then the sun had come out, bursting from the fleecy clouds like a bright, joyous being bent on a race across blue meadows.

From every tree and bush a million glittering drops of rain hung, swaying, scintillating, flashing like pendant diamonds.

And now, from the shelter he had sought among a clump of elders, a man stepped into view, the only human being visible on this grand alternating panorama of nature.

In face, build and attire, he was so completely in harmony with the sun-jeweled landscape, that, as he stood surveying its beauties with the eyes of a dreamer, he seemed a sentient part of it.

His garb was that of a tourist or artist bent on an outing, for which he had selected attire comfortable, appropriate, yet neat.

It fitted his athletic form till the well-built muscles showed swelling and rounded with health and vitality.

The light cap surmounted a brow broad, intellectual, yet bronzed with exposure to the summer sun.

Beneath it flashed eyes poetic, earnest, yet active, subdued to tenderness as they took in the dreamy glories of nature, yet susceptible of expressing vivid emotion when the heart was deeply stirred.

The chin was narrow, yet set, the mouth, sympathetic, yet firm, and, altogether, the striking combination of gravity and gentleness, resolution and tenderness, calculation and purity, method and dreaminess, evinced that their possessor was a remarkable man.

His light tennis-shoes showed preparation for tedious tramps, and were travel-worn and dusty. Across his shoulder ran a strap secured to an oblong case. Hanging to it, too, was what resembled a small portable photographic camera.

He had paused as he stepped from shelter

to enjoy momentarily the glories of hill, field and valley spread before him like a painter's canvas, and to drink in the deep, exhilarating draught of the fresh, cool air, when, with a start, he bent his ear, and, a rapt expression on his fine face, he uttered the quick, involuntary word—

“Hark!”

If his eye had before shown the ardor of a true artist in his survey of the smiling landscape, it now glowed with the eager appreciation of a true musician.

For the divine trinity of pure pleasure was completed, golden light, glowing nature, and now seraphic melody.

Birds were singing, but it was not their sweet notes, clear and resonant as silver beads dropped into a crystal dish, that entranced him.

A near waterfall trickled over the rocks with a swinging murmur of harmony, the soft zephyrs swayed the pines to the rhythm of Æolian melody, but these sounds were drowned in a full, glorious burst of magnificent song.

Like one held in the thrall of the most ex-

quisite pleasure, the young man listened enrapt.

“ Help some soul its strength renew,
As the journey we pursue,
Oh ! the good we all may do,
While the days are passing by ! ”

The words rang out clear and echoing, every quivering leaf seemed to vibrate with them — the golden, lute-like voice that pronounced them seemed to be too seraphic to be human. Well might he listen ! Well might the scintillating rain-drops throb and jar in consonance with the noble song that filled air, heart and senses as if thrilled from the lips of a famous diva !

“ Is the wood enchanted ? ”

The stranger asked himself the question in a subdued tone, as if fearful of breaking a spell of magic.

Then, with wistful eyes and eager steps, he stole along the path leading to a copse, from whence or beyond which had certainly emanated that full, clear burst of glorious melody.

He penetrated the little belt of timber. The forest nymph was nowhere in sight. Approaching its other edge, however, he drew back suddenly, warily.

The fair one stood revealed. If the song had enchanted the traveler, the singer held heart, interest and glance under a new spell of witchery.

Where some wild vines formed a kind of canopy, she lingered, as if there she had taken temporary refuge from the passing shower.

Dreamy influences about her, pure emotions awakened by the happy voices of nature, her soul had found expression for its thoughts, ambitions and aspirations in that song of praise and hope.

Her face was perfect, her form rounded to the symmetry of a Niobe. Only the eyes, half veiled with dewy sadness, told that she was other than some happy maiden, content to wander forever amid the budding beauties of field and forest.

“What a picture!”

The stranger breathed the words soft and low. If his eyes expressed admiration of the lovely face, that ardor was tempered with the quick, artistic sense that proclaimed him to be a true poet and dreamer.

“I must catch that face—the scene, its surroundings,” he went on, eagerly. “Nat-

ure, beauty, art—if she will only keep that pose for another moment!”

His eyes fixed intently upon her, the stranger deftly slipped the smaller box from the strap across his shoulder.

He removed its canvas covering, revealing as he did so a neat photographic camera, provided with catch, slides, focus adjustments and automatic shutter for ready manipulation.

Leaning it against a gnarled, stout vine, he got a perfect focus on the bower, the girl and her immediate surroundings.

The back of the case came into view as he did so. Across the black surface, in plain white letters, was painted a name—his name—for identification of the camera, to protect it from loss or theft.

It read:

JERA LE BRITTA,

PHOTOGRAPHER.

His finger ready to snap the catch that should open the shutter and time the exposure, the artist started.

With slight excitement he peered at the

girl and beyond her, a little gasp of alarm escaping his lips.

For something unexpected had happened, that, in later moments of his life, he was to realize, trivial as it was, should change the current of many careers, and render this a most portentous hour in his young destiny.

The hour was a potent one—he was to know that soon—yes, fate had precipitated a strange climax on that smiling landscape, and “*the hour and the man*” had arrived!

Startled, as has been said, by a somewhat unexpected and remarkable occurrence, the artist was still intent on securing a picture of the fair scene and the fair being who filled it, at all hazards.

His deft fingers touched the button of the camera.

Click!

CHAPTER II.

FALCON AND DOVE.

CLICK!

The work was done! The little shutter lifted, hung suspended for a flashing moment of time, and then shot back into place, hold-

ing its precious secret safe on the sensitive plate within the slide.

A stroke of marvelous art had caught the scene in a flash, had chronicled its every outline, and the picture of the fair girl was the reward of the dexterity of the artist.

Something besides, too! — the excited artist knew that — and instantly his mind recurred to the extraordinary and unexpected occurrence that had disturbed him.

For, just as that ominous click sounded, a baleful presence had appeared to mar the fair scene.

From the dense shrubbery at the side of the bower of vines a human face had come suddenly, startingly into view.

The artist had seen it; he realized its disturbing effect upon an otherwise placid scene, but, fearful that the young girl gazing dreamily at the beautiful landscape might observe it too, and change her pose, he shot the shutter at once.

To the intruder, Jera Le Britta now transferred his attention.

There was something sinister in the actions of the new-comer. His face was that of a man malignant, hate-filled, venomous,

Dressed like a tramp, there was something in his glittering eyes and handsome though evil face, that proclaimed his garb to be a disguise.

He wore a green, broad shade over one eye, and this disfigured, almost concealed his features. He had lifted it to bestow one quick, searching glance on the girl, but lowered it instantly afterward.

The girl had not moved. She was all unconscious of the proximity of the artist, of the sinister cynosure of the tramp.

The latter, never taking his glance from her face, slowly and cautiously extricated himself from the entangling vines that formed a barrier between himself and the bower.

The artist drew nearer to the edge of the wood. There was much in the appearance of the intruder that suggested the slimy serpent bent on decoying and charming the shy, innocent dove. Le Britta's suspicious instincts were aroused, his keenest sense of chivalry, too, and he determined to watch and await the outcome of the scene, that held in its very incipency all the elements of a strange and weird plot.

What had guided his steps hither? Fate!

The girl probably resided in some of the pretty villas that lined the green slopes half-a-mile distant. The man might be a thieving tramp, but his actions indicated some deep motive in studying the girl ere he approached her.

The artist observed him steal noiselessly toward her. Had the glittering gold bracelet on the girl's arm aroused the cupidity of his thieving instincts? No; a few feet distant from the object of his interest, the tramp came to an abrupt halt.

He had stepped on a dry twig, and its crackling had startled the girl. Rapid as a flash she turned. Quick as lightning the tramp dropped to an attitude of the most abject servility, with bent face and extended hand, assuming the pose and bearing of a professional mendicant.

The girl was startled, more, frightened. She uttered a little cry of alarm, shrank back, gazed wildly about her, as if bent on speeding precipitately from the spot, and then, quivering with timidity and dread, she gasped incoherently :

“ Who are you ? What do want ? ”

The man whined out some unintelligible

words. The girl, her hand crossed nervously over her palpitating heart, seemed to strive to regain her composure.

Jera Le Britta, a spell-bound spectator of the scene, saw the tramp's shaded eyes glow from beneath the impromptu mask he wore like those of a baleful basilisk.

"Oh! is it alms?" murmured the fair maiden in a gentle, pitying tone. "You look poor, hungry, tired. Here, I have not much. You are welcome to that."

She drew forth a tiny, jeweled purse. Her fingers trembled as she extended the few coins that it contained.

The tramp edged nearer. His great rough hand closed over the coins and her dainty fingers as well. She shuddered and drew back, for it was evident that the man had made slow work of securing the money, in order to take a keen, sweeping survey of her features.

"Thanks!" he grated forth, hoarsely. "Tell me, lady, though, your name?"

"My name?" repeated the girl, flushing indignantly. "Why should I do that?"

"So I can remember my kind benefactress." So palpable a sneer was manifest in the

accents, that the girl started with suspicious dislike and positive alarm.

With quiet dignity, however, she bestowed a cold look on her pensioner, and said :

“My name cannot be of any interest to you, and I do not care to publish a trifling charity.”

“But I want to know !”

Of a sudden the tramp's bearing changed. He arose from his crouching attitude of mock servility.

Aggressive, insolent, threatening, he blocked her way, as she uttered a cry of alarm.

“And I *will* know !” he blustered. “Charity ? Bah ! Take back your gold, scatter it to the pauper brats down at the almshouse. Keep it, and may it sink you and all about you, but you tell me what I want to know before I leave this spot, or you either, my proud lady !”

With a scornful swing of his hand, the tramp had flung the money in his grasp disdainfully on the ground at the feet of his astounded almoner.

Now, coming nearer to her, he hissed :

“I'd know that face from a picture I saw.

I've watched you and saw you come from Hawthorne villa. You are Gladys Vernon."

The girl grew pale. Her eyes told that the man had made a correct conjecture.

"If I am," she faltered, "what is that to you?"

"You shall see. If you are Gladys Vernon, you are the niece of old Gideon Vernon. It's not you I care to know about. I can guess that you have been lucky enough to be adopted as the favorite of that crotchety old miser, but there's some questions about him I'm going to ask, and you're going to answer."

The girl's face had grown steadily whiter. Defiance, fear, played alternately across her colorless features.

Le Britta, about to spring forward and relieve her from the presence and distressing importunities of the insolent intruder, restrained himself, as some intuitive instinct told him that the man's later actions might reveal his motive in thus interrogating her, and afford her friends a clue to his designs.

"First," announced the man, "I want to know if old Vernon is not pretty near used up."

"My uncle is quite ill," spoke the girl, icily.

"Good! He'd ought to die!" was the heartless rejoinder. "Now then, has he altered his will lately?"

The tramp fairly hissed the words. So intense was his malignity of expression, that Miss Gladys Vernon recoiled with a cry of terror.

"I will not tell you. You are some villain seeking to learn his secrets, to do him harm. Release me! help! help! help!"

For the villain had seized her white, shapely wrists in his brutal grasp.

"You *shall* tell me!" he glowered, fiercely. "Quick! Has he changed his will? Speak! I will know!"

"You scoundrel, lie there!"

Smack!

The man who could paint pictures, and write poetry, and dream over sunny landscapes, could fight, as well.

All the chivalry in his energetic nature aroused, Jera Le Britta had sprung forward.

His good right arm shot out like a piston rod.

His sinewy fist landed squarely between the eyes of the insolent boor before him.

And the next moment, as the fair young

girl clung frantically to the photographer's free arm for support, the trampish knave who had insulted her, measured his length on the ground at her feet.

CHAPTER III.

A STARTLING RECOGNITION.

JERA LE BRITTA was a practical man, and had led a prosaic life. That is, only sentiment and a love for the artistic had been the main diversity in his existence from plodding, everyday routine.

The hour for action had arrived, however, and he was not found lacking. A gentleman, a friend to distress wherever found, his heart had responded like magic to the call of beauty unprotected.

The tableau that ensued to his speedy interference in the scene at the wild-vine bower, was a dramatic one. His fine face aglow with indignation and resolve, he formed a fitting companion for the innocent girl, who trustingly recognized him as a valued protector, and a striking contrast to the enraged and discomfited boor at his feet.

"Leave!" he ordered, making a second advance toward the prostrate ruffian, but Miss Vernon interposed a restraining hand.

"You have punished him enough," she faltered, tremulously. "Let him depart in peace."

"Peace!" snorted the tramp, struggling to his feet and scowling frightfully. "I'll show you, my haughty lady. You, too, you insolent interferer. I'll" ——

"Go, if you are wise!" ordered Le Britta, warningly.

With a malevolent scowl, the subdued knave shrank from the spot.

"Do not tremble so, you are safe now," spoke the photographer to his companion.

"He frightened me!" quavered the girl, apprehensively. "He hinted at such dreadful things about uncle! He has threatened even you!"

Le Britta smiled confidently.

"He will do wisely to keep out of my path in the future," he said. "And now, Miss Vernon" ——

"What! You know my name?" said the girl, with surprise.

"I was a witness to your interview with

that malignant scoundrel," explained the artist. "From his lips I learned your name. You reside near here?"

She pointed across the valley, to a pretentious mansion gleaming white and massive among the trees on the other slope.

"I live with my uncle," she murmured, "and I must hasten home. He will be anxious about me. I had been to the village on an errand, was caught in the shower, and sought shelter here."

"And joined the birds in singing a bright welcome to the returning sunshine?" remarked Le Britta.

The young girl flushed with embarrassment.

"You heard me," she faltered.

"That song led me to you," replied the photographer. "One moment, Miss Vernon, till I secure my traps, and I will accompany you on your way."

"Oh! I could not think of troubling you," she said.

"It will be a pleasure to me, perhaps a protection to you," responded Le Britta. "That scoundrel may seek to trouble you again."

"But he has disappeared."

"Perhaps only temporarily. I do not wish to needlessly alarm you, but that man is no tramp."

"Then"——

"He was disguised."

"For what purpose?"

"I know not, only his questions evinced a familiarity with your family history. He means your uncle harm, I fear."

"Oh! I hope not," murmured the girl, concernedly, clasping her hands in frantic anxiety. "Uncle is so low and nervous that the least thing will startle him. He has some secret care all the time, and this rude fellow would alarm, terrify him! Yes! yes! If you will accompany me; if you will explain to uncle. He may know the man. You can warn him, enlighten him."

Le Britta had secured his camera and other traps. Miss Vernon, leaning lightly on his arm, they took the path leading toward the villa she had indicated.

The great, honest heart of the artist went out in sympathy toward his fair companion as they walked along the flower-spangled path.

The consciousness of duty done made him content. A keen interest in the girl led him to hope they should know more of one another ere they parted.

His expansive nature ever took a delight in deeds of chivalry and kindness; and, as she told him of the lonely life she led at the sequestered villa, he marveled that so fair a face had not long since attracted the loving attention of some kindred spirit.

Opulence and stability showed on every side, as Gladys led the way into the extensive grounds of Hawthorne villa.

Grandeur, tinged with gloom, haunted the massive rooms within the house with their rich adornment.

Miss Vernon indicated a chair in the drawing-room, and said she would see if her uncle was able to receive a visitor.

The latter could hear her speak in low, gentle tones to some one in the next apartment beyond the closed doors. Then a more masculine tone answered faintly, and then she reappeared with her soft, pleasing smile.

"Uncle will see you, Mr. Le Britta," she said. "I want you to tell him all about the

man I met, only do not excite him too much."

"I think you are wise in enlightening him," assented the photographer. "That man certainly means mischief to your uncle."

"Uncle, this is Mr. Le Britta, a gentleman whose friendly kindness served me in a situation of peril to-day."

"Peril!" repeated a startled voice, and Le Britta found himself bowing to an austere, white-haired old man, propped up among pillows in an arm-chair near the open window.

"Embarrassment, Miss Vernon should have said," interpolated Le Britta, lightly. "Do not be alarmed, Mr. Vernon. I am a photographer on a wayward tour, and I chanced to interfere with the insolence of a tramp a short time since."

With shrewd *finesse*, the photographer proceeded to relate the incident of the hour. He told the story simply, robbing the narration of all exciting details as far as possible.

To his surprise, however, as he concluded the recital, Mr. Vernon grew dreadfully pale, and, sinking back among the pillows, uttered a worried moan.

"Trouble — peril!" he gasped. "Yes! Yes! It means something. Oh! must my life be ever filled with fear? Gladys, this man was no tramp."

"I think not."

"An enemy, then. Yes, yes"——

"Uncle, I pray you do not get excited!" exclaimed Gladys, solicitously. "You know the doctor forbade any agitation."

"But this man—he knew your name. He threatened me! He asked about my will"——

"He may have been some prying rogue bent only on terrifying Miss Vernon," suggested Le Britta, soothingly.

"No!" cried her uncle, forcibly. "There is a plot here. Ah! I feared it. Quick, Gladys! describe him."

The young girl did so to the best of her ability. There was no sign of recognition in old Gideon Vernon's ashen face as she concluded, however.

"I *must* know who that man is," he cried, in a sharp, querulous tone. "I am satisfied that peril menaces us. Who can he be?"

"Ah! I had forgotten it."

Le Britta arose suddenly to his feet as he spoke, a latent excitement in his eyes.

"Forgotten what?" demanded Mr. Vernon, wonderingly.

"You would like to know who the tramp was?"

"I shall know no rest till I find out," answered the old man, anxiously.

"Will his picture do?"

"His picture?"

"Yes."

"Have you got it?" inquired the old man, eagerly.

"I have."

"Where? Show it to me!"

"It must be developed first. Allow me to explain. I was taking a snap-shot picture with my camera of Miss Vernon. Just then the tramp came into view. His face, as well, will show clearly on the plate."

"What fortune? Where is it?"

"In my camera, but I can develop a negative quickly, only I must have a dark room in which to perfect it."

Le Britta soon made his interested and excited auditors comprehend what he had to do in order to produce a distinguishable picture.

Soon, too, he was shown to a dark apartment. Here, with ruby lamp, trays and

chemicals, he perfected the plate taken from the camera.

Old Gideon Vernon's hands trembled with excitement as he saw him reappear, bearing the glass plate between his fingers.

"It is a perfect picture," spoke Le Britta, as he held the plate between the old man's range of vision and the light of the open window. "See, Mr. Vernon, there is your niece, and here is the tramp. Do you recognize him?"

With staring eyes the old man glared at the outlines on the plate.

Then, with a hollow groan, he threw up his thin, white hands, and sank back a huddled, senseless heap among the pillows, with the agonized utterance:

"It is he—the dead alive. Act, Gladys! act! or—all is lost!"

CHAPTER IV.

FROM THE PAST.

JERA LE BRITTA looked startled as he observed the wealthy and aged Gideon Vernon sink back insensible, uttering those ominous words—

"Act, Gladys, act ! or all is lost !"

The effect of this marvelous statement on the girl, was to drive every vestige of color from her face.

"He is dying !" she shrieked, bending over the limp and motionless figure of her uncle. "The shock has killed him."

"No, no, Miss Vernon," said Le Britta, quickly. "He has only fainted. You really must not excite yourself. Allow me to give him the attention he needs. Bring some water."

The young photographer knew much of chemicals, something as well about medicines. He hastened to examine a medicine case outspread on the table. Selecting a phial, he poured a few drops into the goblet which Gladys presented with a trembling hand and fear-filled face, and then, approaching the invalid again, he forced the stimulant between the ashen lips of the old man.

Watched with haunted, frightened eyes by the girl, and speculatively by the more composed artist, the invalid slowly rallied. A sigh escaped his lips, his eyes opened, glared wildly about him, and then, with a shudder, he gasped hoarsely :

“Where is he—that man—Ralph Durand?”

“Is that the name of the tramp?” began Le Britta.

“He is no tramp.”

“I suspected as much.”

“He is a scoundrel of the deepest dye, an enemy, a man to fear, a being to chain, as you would a wild beast; and I thought him dead! I rested in fancied security!”

“You may be mistaken; a fancied resemblance,” hazarded Le Britta.

“No!” cried the old man, definitely, “I am not in error. It is no fancied resemblance. There is but one Ralph Durand in the world, and he has appeared in this vicinity to-day. The picture you showed me is his. Do you know what that means?”

Le Britta regarded the hollow-eyed invalid and his increasing agitation with alarm. Vernon’s nerves were at a frightful tension.

“It means plot, peril, crime, and the will—all! I see it all. I must be calm, I must act with promptness and prudence, or we are lost. Gladys, I must see you alone to direct you. You must hasten to the village at

once. This stranger must not be harassed with our family troubles"——

"Mr. Vernon," interrupted Le Britta, gravely, "it is true that I am a stranger, but I am deeply interested, and deeply sympathize in your troubles. You are in a dangerously weak condition. Too much excitement may prove fatal to you. I beg of you to be calm, to composedly tell me your story, and allow me to aid you in any way I can. You surely would not think of sending your niece back into danger of meeting that villain again?"

"Trust a stranger?" mused Vernon, dubiously.

"Yes, uncle, you can trust Mr. Le Britta," spoke Gladys, with a grateful, confident glance at her rescuer.

"I will," announced Vernon, resolutely. "Mr. Le Britta, I depend solely on you to aid me, to protect this fair young girl who will soon be friendless, as she is an orphan."

"No! no! uncle, do not say that," sobbed Gladys.

"It is true. I feel that I cannot long survive this last shock," proceeded the invalid.

"I am a wealthy man, Mr. Le Britta, with

but one near relative, my darling, faithful Gladys. To her, three years ago, I left by will all my fortune."

"Then what interest can this villain Ralph Durand have in knowing about it — what have you to fear from him?" queried Le-Britta, wonderingly.

Vernon shivered apprehensively.

"Much to fear at all times," he replied, "but just now only regarding Gladys' future. This man is a distant relative, a half cousin. Three years ago he was my favorite. Gladys was not with me then. I trusted Durand with the control of my property. I treated him like a son. I had deposited in a bank several thousand dollars which I intended leaving to him when I die. I made a will. Gladys, of course, was my sole heiress. In that will I appointed as as her guardian this man Ralph Durand, with rare discretionary powers, until she was of age, for I trusted him implicitly. His fellow-trustee was a friend of mine, Doctor Winston."

"I understand," nodded Le Britta, comprehendingly.

"That will I deposited with my city lawyer. In his safe it has since lain. A short time

after I made it, Durand was unmasked to me. Slowly, doubtingly I grew to believe, and, finally, investigated the dark rumors that reached my ears about his bad habits. I learned that he was a profligate, a gambler of the worst kind, that he openly scoffed at me as 'a golden goose he was plucking' to his evil-minded companions in vice. I found that he had systematically robbed me, that he was a forger and an embezzler in matters of my estate. I summoned him to my presence, and told him all. I ordered him from my door. He left. That night he managed to get a forged check for a large amount on my banker cashed, and on a second forged order he obtained a box containing some private papers of mine. Among them was a—a document," and Vernon faltered and paled visibly. "It referred to a family secret that I wished to guard at all hazards. I sent detectives on his track, but it was of no avail. Every day dreading that from some secure and distant place he would begin to menace me with giving publicity to the secret, I shuddered and feared. Finally, one day, in a newspaper I read that Ralph Durand had been killed in a drunken brawl in a far

western mining tavern. I was free. I was only haunted after that with the fear that some one might accidentally find the document he had stolen, and attempt to blackmail me or publish the same. Now," and the old man's eyes expressed a deep anxiety, "he reappears suddenly, mysteriously, he was not dead at all. He has returned to wreak his baleful hate on myself, and the only relative I have in the wide world."

Le Britta was intensely interested in the strange, graphic recital, but he said, sternly :

"And, Mr. Vernon, what is to prevent you from sending word to the nearest police official to arrest this knave who robbed and disgraced you?"

"No ! no !" uttered Vernon, quickly. "I dare not do that. Too well Ralph Durand understands his power, and he will wield it without mercy. He probably has the compromising document I refer to, and he knows I would rather pay a fortune than have it published.

"And that document?" insinuated Le Britta, curiously.

"I dare not tell you. Gladys, too, must never know. Leave all that to me. I will

find a means of securing and destroying it, if I live. I will, later, negotiate with this villain for its surrender for a money consideration, but just now there is a far more vital point that agonizes me and demands attention."

"And that is?" queried Le Britta.

"The will," ejaculated Vernon, forcibly and excitedly.

"The one you made"——

"Three years since. It has never been changed. It lies at the lawyer's, just as I left it."

"What!" exclaimed Le Britta, incredulously. "Surely, Mr. Vernon, you do not mean that you allowed that important document to remain as it was with that villain Ralph Durand as guardian to Miss Vernon."

"Yes, I know it was reprehensible, but, let me explain. For a time I was so worried over Durand, that I never thought of the will. Then Gladys came from boarding-school to brighten my life, and it again escaped my mind. One day I thought of it, and arranged to go and get it, destroy it, and make a new will, appointing a new guardian. That very day I read of Ralph Durand's death. That

relieved me of all dread. If he was dead, the mention of his guardianship was invalid. Naturally, Doctor Winston, a trusted friend, would become successor in trust. The will was made extra strong and with care, and blind that I was to the future, I never worried about it."

"But now," began Le Britta, and paused.

"Now, to be plain, if I should die to-night," —

"Oh! uncle," murmured Gladys, with a shudder, nestling closer to her beloved relative.

"Yes, if I should die to-night," pursued Vernon, steadily, that man Durand would appear here to-morrow in all his insolence and villainy, your legally-appointed guardian — the guardian of my pure, innocent Gladys. Oh! it is terrible to contemplate. Worse than that, in my blind confidence in him I gave Durand, under the terms of the will, an absolute temporary control of everything, without bond or legal accountability. No! no! I must take no risks. Not for a day, for a single hour. We must, indeed, act, or all is lost!"

"Then why not send to your lawyer for the will?" suggested Le Britta.

"It is in the city. A day's journey there, a day's journey back."

"Telegraph to have it destroyed."

"In an important step like that they might hesitate. No, I have a plan that obviates it all."

"May I ask what it is?" queried the photographer.

"Yes, a new will."

"Ah!"

"I will send at once for the village lawyer, Mr. Munson. You will go for me, Mr. Le Britta?"

"Certainly."

"Bring him at once. I will have him draw out a new will, giving all my property to Gladys, but appointing a new guardian. You and the lawyer can witness it. I will deposit it in a safe place. This will invalidate the old will. Then I can rest in peace, then I can defy this villain, who, I verily believe, would murder me if he knew how affairs stood—his rude questioning of Gladys proves that."

"You are right, Mr. Vernon," spoke Le

Britta, comfortingly. "Your clear-headed plan removes all obstacles from your path. Where am I to go — what is the name of the village lawyer?"

Mr. Vernon directed his guest, and urged dispatch. For a moment Le Britta busied himself adjusting his camera for future use. Then he announced his readiness to depart on his strange and important mission.

"I can never forget your great kindness to us, Mr. Le Britta," spoke Mr. Vernon. "Once the new will is made, I shall feel as if I have a new lease of life. Why, sir, what is the matter?"

Le Britta had started violently. He even uttered a quick ejaculation of surprise, almost alarm.

About to speak, he turned his glance from the open window whither with fixed intensity it had just been directed, and evaded a reply, by saying, with forced calmness :

"I am ready to depart on my errand, Mr. Vernon."

Every pulse was quickened, his nerves were at a high tension, however, as he left the room.

He knew that to reveal the truth to the

invalid, would be to startle, alarm him, possibly imperil his life.

For, peering in at the window through the thick vines that trellised it, he had seen the evil, malignant face of the pretended tramp, Gideon Vernon's old time enemy —

Ralph Durand !

CHAPTER V.

"TINCTURE OF IODINE."

MISS VERNON accompanied the artist to the door. Her eyes expressed gratitude, her working features told of how she valued the kind friend so strangely come to her rescue in a time of direful need.

"Watch out closely for that villain Durand," spoke Le Britta, seriously. "I shall not be gone long."

As soon as Gladys reëntered the house, however, he glided stealthily around the corner of the mansion.

"It was no delusion," he murmured. "That man, the tramp, Ralph Durand, was certainly at the window. He may have overheard every word of our conversation."

Le Britta was forced to act with caution.

He dared not alarm Mr. Vernon by telling him of his latest startling discovery.

He penetrated the shrubbery, he sought everywhere for a trace of the lurking scoundrel, but none was vouchsafed him.

"He has disappeared," soliloquized Le Britta. "He surely will attempt no villainy in broad daylight. I can only hasten on my mission, and, returning, aid this poor old man and his niece by advice and protection."

Le Britta hurried toward the distant village at a rapid gait. His thoughts kept pace with his swift walk.

That earnest mind of his was deeply engrossed in the case that a mere trifling accident had made a seeming part of his life, a vivid chapter in the book of destiny.

"The camera supplies the clue," he reflected. "It is like the affair where I photographed the brain of a murdered man, and that strange evidence played a conspicuous part in the trial that ensued. Ah! the possibilities of my profession. It is artistic in the highest sense, yet material. It is the connecting link between the past and the present. It illuminates that past, it sanctifies the present, it makes bright the future. A picture is

fadeless. It gives to the mourner the sweet face of the cherished dead. It preserves the record of love, devotion and fidelity. In this case, it has played the detective, may the results baffle villainy, and bring peace and happiness to those two imperiled souls."

Truly, indeed, a great art was that to which Jera Le Britta had devoted his life and enegies.

He had made a study of photography. From the wavering steps of Daguerre to the proud, steady progress of a Sarony or a Drake, he had followed the advancement of the art, delving into its details, investigating its possibilities, experimenting, combining, improving, until the boundless scope was becoming a field of never-failing delight and surprise to his keen, artistic senses.

He had been a successful man in his labors thus far. Jera Le Britta had idolized his work. He saw in the art to which his efforts were directed, a purpose, a reward in mental and moral development and pleasures, that were beyond mere financial recompense. From such compensations, content and satisfaction had been wrought, and, with a pure ambition to excel and elevate his profession,

he knew that the hard-earned results would be more than the trivial praise awarded to a man who follows alone the "fad" of the hour, or labors only for folly or amusement.

The highest, truest praise had often been his, but because he had added to the majesty of a beautiful art. He had begun with no special advantages, and in a small way. He had made steady progress, adding instruments and facilities to his studio, until he stood in the front rank of his profession. All this was the result of diligent study, constant application and artistic ideas.

Such was the man who had found his heart responding to the call of distress, and although his business soon called him from a well-earned vacation, he resolved to devote time and energy to disentangle the skein of two harassed lives, feeling that his own would be the happier for the temporary sacrifice.

The glare of the city did not fascinate him—nature was his queen, his art, his shrine. Quick of touch, deft of perception, thinking far more of an honorable, aspiring career of usefulness than of simple worldly dross, he had engaged in the defense of a menaced

couple of lonely, frightened people, with no thought of reward, but from a pure sense of chivalry and right.

The complications of the plot in sight interested and yet startled him vaguely. He could scarcely understand such deep villainy, and yet he realized that the scoundrel, Durand, held the whip-hand over Gideon Vernon through the secret of his life, and menaced him powerfully and balefully. Later he resolved to appeal to the invalid to boldly defy his persecutor, but first he plainly realized the all-important thing was the execution of a new will, rescinding and invalidating the document that made the sordid Durand the guardian of the fortune and happiness of beautiful Gladys Vernon.

Le Britta reached the village in an hour. A second hour was lost in seeking the lawyer, Mr. Munson, for whom he had been sent, and the result a keen and perplexing dissapointment. He experienced no difficulty in locating the office of the attorney, but found only a clerk there.

"I wish to see Mr. Munson," he spoke. "Mr. Vernon wishes to have him come to his villa at once."

"Mr. Munson is out," answered the dapper, smart-appearing subordinate.

"Where can I find him?"

"He went to see Judge Elston about a case. The large house beyond the depot."

Arrived at the judicial residence, Le Britta found only a servant there.

She stated that her employer and Lawyer Munston had taken a carriage, and had driven over to the next village to see about a case on trial there.

"Do you know when they will return," queried the protographer, anxiously.

"No; not before late to-night, though."

"I may as well return to the villa. There is no other lawyer in town," reflected Le Britta. "Mr. Vernon will be anxious, and I fear that villain Durand. Why can he not write his own will, and secure another witness beside myself, from some neighboring residence?" "Yes," he decided; "I will return and suggest that course to him."

Le Britta, therefore, started back the way he had come.

Just as he left the village, he paused for a moment, bent his ear, listened, and then

smiled, despite the grave responsibilities that weighed upon his mind.

A boy, mending a kite in a back yard, was singing at the top of his voice, and the strain he was laboring over was the chorus of a song that was a ruling favorite just then on the comedy stage.

His youthful voice rang out clear and resonant as the piping cry of a red-bird —

“ But there came upon the scene a bright photographer,
There came upon the scene a bright photographer,
There wasn't a biographer,
Nor e'en a lexicographer,
Who did not write about this bright photographer.”

Le Britta smiled. Life had its humorous side, even where gravity was the rule of the hour, but the momentary influence of merriment soon gave way to the more somber duties of the time.

He reached the grounds of Hawthorne villa somewhat wearied from his long tramp. He took a keen glance about the garden, the lurking Durand still in his thoughts; then, being positive that he caught the murmur of human voices just beyond a gothic summer-house encased in foliage, he drew near to it, and peered through the interlacing vines.

“ Hello! What does this mean?”

Well might the photographer stare in wonder, and repeat the startled ejaculation !

For it was not the plotful Durand that he saw, but, outlined plainly in the soft light of the structure, the fair form of the debonair Gladys, and, holding her snowy hand, and peering into her flushing, down-cast face, was a young man.

“A lover—she has a lover !” murmured Le Britta. “Here is a new complication. If he is only worthy of her”——

He had no thought of playing the eaves-dropper, but the scene held him momentarily captive. Honest brotherly interest in Miss Vernon caused him to study the face of her companion keenly.

A reader of men, he looked pleased and satisfied as a second glance at the athletic young fellow convinced the photographer that he was one of nature's noblemen.

“No, dear Sydney, you must not think of seeing uncle just now,” Gladys was saying.

“But I cannot endure this suspense. I cannot have him at enmity with me, and all for a foolish misunderstanding,” persisted her companion. “We love each other, Gladys, do we not? We are pledged to one another.

Your uncle quarreled with me because I insisted on an early union. Hot-tempered, I was unreasonably haughty with him. The result is a coldness between us. No, dear heart! I value your peace of mind and Mr. Vernon's good opinion too deeply to be at odds with him. I shall try to see him some time soon — this evening, probably, and confess my willfulness, and smooth over our little inconsistencies of temper. I will have it so! Ah! he is calling you. There! you must go. Good-by, my life's love and light! Until tomorrow, adieu!"

There was the echo of a kiss, and Le Britta gained the front portals of the house just as Gladys, red as a peony, came around the garden path.

"Oh! Mr. Le Britta, you have returned?" she murmured, confusedly.

"Yes, Miss Vernon."

"And alone?"

"The lawyer is out of town."

"O dear! what will uncle say?"

Le Britta explained his new plan. It seemed to please her, and she led the way into the house.

"I like that young fellow she called Syd-

ney," reflected Le Britta. "I hope I may have an opportunity of helping to heal that breach in the sadly disorganized, domestic distress of this strange family."

He found that the invalid had caused his chair to be wheeled out on the porch, where the bright sunshine filtered through the cool, green leaves of overhanging boughs, and, seating himself by his side, Le Britta told him of the result of his visit to the village.

Mr. Vernon was disappointed over the report at first, but Le Britta soon convinced him that they could arrange the affair of the will quite as well without legal assistance.

"I think I can dictate the proper form," he said. "You can write it, Mr. Vernon, and it will need two witnesses. I will act as one."

"And the other?" murmured Vernon.

"Some neighbor" ——

Mr. Vernon frowned, annoyedly.

"Not my *nearest* neighbor," he spoke, severely. "The young gentleman boarding there has taken occasion to resent my will, and "——

An imploring look from Gladys silenced the old man on that score, but he added :

"We can find some one readily. Yes, yes !

My dear friend, your suggestions are invaluable. We will proceed to business at once."

Le Britta was glad to have the matter so satisfactorily adjusted. He got ready to help wheel the invalid's chair back into his room from the porch, meantime congratulating himself that Durand had not appeared during his absence.

He little dreamed it, but Durand was very near to him at that moment.

There was a rustle among the vines near the open window of the now vacant sick-room, as the conversation on the porch terminated.

The next moment, an uncouth figure sprang over the window-sill and landed on the floor of the apartment beyond.

It was Ralph Durand, the pretended tramp, only the disfiguring shade was torn from his face now, revealing all the dangerous brightness of his evil-piercing glance.

Those eyes swept the apartment in a quick flash. His lip was curled in scorn, his manner bold, insolent, aggressive.

"So!" he murmured, "old Gideon Vernon seeks to outwit me, does he? A man with three years' experience among the rough

miners of the west scarcely stops at the weak efforts of a dying miser, a love-sick girl, and a philanthropic photographer. The game is in my hands, if Gideon Vernon dies. He shall die! Fortunately I have overheard all their plans. But the new will? My only hope is to still watch covertly. I cannot prevent its execution, but I can find and destroy it later. Once guardian of the beautiful Gladys, once I handle the Vernon fortune, I will make no mistake next time. Mercy! the very thing!"

With a prodigious start the man with the murderous heart and an eye of lurid, baleful fire sprang to the side of the table.

There, outspread, was the medicine case. His glance, running over the phials and bottles it contained, rested, fascinated, on one of them.

Tightly corked, it bore the label, *Tincture of Iodine*.

The man's eyes blazed with fervid delight as he read it.

"Tincture of Iodine!" he ejaculated, with a hoarse, grating chuckle. "What fortune! Luckily I know the deft uses of that subtle acid. Ah! Gideon Vernon, write your will,

it will prove waste paper. Only a minute in which to act, to disappear. Then, unless they suspect, I am safe !”

Durand glided to the mantel. There lay a tray of writing materials. Two tiny ink-bottles rested in oxidized silver clasps. He detached them, and poured their contents into the grate. Then, rubbing them carefully clean on the sleeve of his ragged coat, he refilled them from the bottle of iodine.

He glided through the window just as the door opened to admit Le Britta, Gladys, and Gideon Vernon into his invalid chair.

Supreme satisfaction wreathed the sinister features of the plotter.

Well might he smile, and hope, and wait, lurking at the open window.

For, upon the substitution of the innocent acid for the ink hung the hopes, the fortune, the happiness of winsome, bright-hearted Gladys Vernon.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WILL.

MR. VERNON was showing the results of over-excitement as Le Britta wheeled him into the room just vacated by Durand.

That resolute eye of his, however, evidenced that he was determined to carry out the project suggested by the photographer, and after sinking back among the pillows and resting for a moment or two, he said:

"Wheel the table nearer, Gladys, and bring the writing materials from the mantel."

The devoted girl obeyed him, with that instinctive gentleness and lack of bustle that evidenced long attention to the invalid. She placed pens and paper near to his hand, and brought as well the oxidized ink-wells, the contents of which had been so mysteriously juggled by Durand only a few minutes previous.

As for the pretended tramp himself, if he still lurked at the window, he did so too deftly to betray his near proximity.

"Now then, Mr. Le Britta, begin," spoke the old man.

The photographer joggled his memory to

recall the legal formula for a will, and Mr. Vernon began writing.

"What miserable ink!" he ejaculated, suddenly and with irritation. "It looks like iron-rust water.

Gladys did not pay any attention to the remark, attributing it to failing eyesight and the usual crotchety, fault-finding temper of her sick relative.

"It makes a wretched blotch, looks like brown paint," again uttered Vernon, wrathfully, surveying with a frown of annoyance the first few words he had written on the white page before him. "Is there none better in the house, Gladys?"

"I fear not, uncle," murmured his niece, gently.

"I suppose I'll have to make it do," growled Vernon. "Proceed, Mr. Le Britta."

The photographer supplied the words of the form usually adopted in framing a will, and Mr. Vernon wrote in his bequests. He left all his property, real and personal, to his beloved niece, Gladys Vernon. When he referred to his moneyed possessions, he glanced at a cabinet in one corner of the apartment, seemed to be about to refer to

something there, evidently changed his mind, and then concluded the instrument by appointing Doctor Winston and Jera Le Britta his executors, and guardians of Gladys during her brief minority.

Le Britta flushed gratefully at the compliment thus paid to him. It evidenced the confidence with which he had inspired the old man, and the regard which he felt for him.

Always a heart-winner, with his unobtrusive, earnest ways, the present acknowledgment of his devotion, while it placed an obligation upon him, still pleased him.

"Thank goodness! that is off my mind," exclaimed Vernon, with a great sigh of satisfaction and relief.

"Not quite yet, uncle," insinuated Gladys, gently.

"Eh! you mean?" ——

"The witnesses."

"True, Mr. Le Britta, you will sign here."

"Not until the other witness is here," interrupted the photographer. "The witnesses must sign each in the presence of the other."

"Uncle, the housekeeper has returned, will not her signature help us out?"

"She is not an interested party, she is not mentioned in the will," spoke Le Britta.

"Yes, that will save us the trouble of summoning an outsider."

Gladys left the apartment, and returned with a pleasant-faced woman of about forty, a few minutes later.

"Mrs. Darrell, Mr. Le Britta," uttered Gladys, and the photographer bowed, and proceeded to the side of Mr. Vernon.

He started slightly as his eyes rested closely on the written page.

The writing was plain enough, but the ink used was wretched. Mr. Vernon had spoken truly. It looked as if written with the worst faded ink. About to speak of it Le Britta checked himself. Every little occurrence agitated the invalid, and what, after all, mattered obscure ink, so that it made a legible record.

He signed his name as witness, the housekeeper followed his example and withdrew from the apartment, and Mr. Vernon pushed the document across the table, as if to allow it to dry.

Gladys' pretty face showed the relief of a difficult task accomplished. She was glad to get the affair off her uncle's mind. Unconsciously, her nervous fingers rested on the camera a few feet away from the written page.

"Take care, Miss Vernon!" laughed Le Britta, "or you'll be shooting off my loaded camera. The will, Mr. Vernon?" he continued, interrogatively, as the invalid made a motion toward it.

Vernon took up the document and folded it up. He placed it in an envelope, sealed it, and handed it to Gladys.

"Take it, my child," he said. "It will be safe in your keeping. Hide it where you can be sure to find it when I die."

"Oh, I hope that will be a long, long time, dear uncle," returned Gladys, sincerely.

The invalid uttered a moan of weariness.

"I am very tired," he spoke. "Draw the shades, and I will try to sleep a little. Gladys, Mr. Le Britta must remain with us for a day or two."

"I fear I will have to be getting back to business, Mr. Vernon," demurred the photographer. "I have already extended my

vacation, and there is a convention of the Knights of Pythias, where they insist nobody can photograph their august assemblage except my poor self."

"At least remain until to-morrow," urged Vernon. "I wish to have a confidential interview with you when I am rested. I do not feel equal to the task, after the excitement of the day."

Le Britta could not very well refuse. Gladys darkened the sick-room, and led her guest to the broad outside porch, where he had the choice of swinging chairs or a hammock, brought him some books, and left him, to aid the housekeeper in providing for his comfort during his anticipated brief stay.

From reading and resting, Le Britta fell to meditation over all the strange occurrences of the past few hours.

Every element in the case under meditation was clearly outlined and comprehended in his quick mind, except one—the relation of the young man he had seen conversing with Gladys in the garden, her lover-like companion, whom she had called Sydney.

Feeling naturally a warm interest in the fair, innocent creature whose happiness

seemed menaced by a villain ; he hoped that a reconciliation would take place between the lover and Gladys' irascible uncle ere he left. Then he could leave with the assurance that both had a protector, in case Durand attempted to trouble them further.

"I do not see how Durand can bother Vernon now," mused Le Britta, "except through the secret he holds. What a strange fate led me to participate in the ambitions, hopes and fears of these two people ! To-morrow, however, I must leave the field of romance, to return to the humdrum existence of practical labor. I may never see them again ; but the experience has enabled me to do a kind deed, and win new friends. My vacation has done me good. To-morrow I must welcome studio, home, friends and those I love so dearly."

Le Britta's face glowed with affection and happiness, as he pictured the happy home-circle that knew him as father, husband, protector and guide—the ever-gentle wife, the two happy-hearted cherubs who made life worth living, the bright-eyed, intelligent young lady whom he had recently taken into

his employ under his instructions, to aid in the more artistic portion of his work.

The bustling, energetic, typical western town where he had settled down in business, was about fifty miles distant from Hawthorne villa. Here Le Britta had been located for several years, from a bare two hundred dollars having worked up in his business until he had amassed a generous competency, and at thirty years of age was beloved and respected by his fellow-townsmen — with the fame of his artistic excellence spread far and wide. He had learned the rudiments of his art in three of the larger western cities ; had known all the comforts and luxuries of wealth and refinement, but when reverses came to his parents, he had struck out manfully for himself, and now, having amassed a small fortune, he thought far more of the good it enabled him to do, and of his profession, than of the mere satisfaction of piling up riches.

In all this struggle, his noble helpmate had been an aid, a comforter, an adviser, a kindred spirit. Perhaps the happiness she had brought to him warmed his heart with noble, generous sympathy for those less fortunate, whom he endeavored to place upon a like

basis of right-doing and earnest adherence to the principles of success in life. She, like himself, was an artist, and with her critical taste to aid him, and the molding of the mind of his assistant, Maud Gordon, the atmosphere of his neat, beautiful studio was one of high art, rather than professional labor.

“With the morrow the old life of work, recompense, happiness,” murmured Le Britta; and his eyes closing in a muse of peaceful contemplation, he slumbered before he was aware of the insidious approach of the drowsy god.

It was nearly dusk when he awoke with a start. Something had aroused him with a shock. He sprang to his feet excitedly.

“What was it!” he ejaculated, alarmed. “Some one cried for help. There it is again!”

He ran to the door leading out upon the porch. As he gained it, in accents of the wildest terror, through the gloomy, silent house rang out the wild, frantic tones of Gladys Vernon:

“Help! help! help!”

Yes, something had happened. In a flash, Jera Le Britta, with a vivid memory of Du-

rand, the tramp, of the exciting incidents of the early afternoon, felt certain.

But what?

He was soon to know! Something had, indeed, happened! something strangely exciting, distressing, tragic; and that terrified shriek, repeated, announced the fact.

“Help! help! help!”

CHAPTER VII.

A TRAGIC HOUR.

WHEN Jera Le Britta and Gladys left Mr. Vernon to the solitude of the sick room, the latter sank back in his chair with a weary sigh.

It was true that a great care had been removed from his mind by the settlement of the matter of the will, but his eyes were still haunted with worrying dread, and he shuddered every time he thought of the man so feared—Ralph Durand.

“I have blocked his game in one way—he can never become Gladys’ guardian, nor secure the control of my estate now,” reflected the invalid; “but he will doubtless attempt to

persecute me in the matter of the old family secret. He is a desperate man and will try to blackmail me, to sell me the secret. Well, money can silence his lips. Then I shall know some peace again. Ah! if I were not so weak. For Gladys' sake I would like to live. This new friend, Le Britta — his coming has been a rare blessing to us."

Vernon's mind became gradually quieted down, as he realized that he had a stanch, strong defender so near to him, and he dozed lightly.

It was just getting dusk, and he was about to tap the little silver bell at his hand, the customary signal for his faithful nurse, Gladys, when he started, and with quickening breath, fixed his eyes upon the window.

The curtains had moved aside, and a villainous faced peered in. It was instantly withdrawn, however, as Vernon barely suppressed a startled, agitated cry.

"Durand!" gasped the affrighted invalid. "He still haunts the place. The will? No. That is safe with Gladys, but the money box? Can that be his motive?"

With infinite difficulty the invalid lifted himself to an upright position. He managed

to drag the little medicine chest nearer to him. Then, with trembling fingers, he selected a bottle from the many that the case contained, and, by the dim light reading the inscription that it bore, he lifted it to his lips and drained its contents.

"The doctor gave me that as a final exigency," he murmured. "I demanded a draught that would revive and give me strength as a last vital emergency. The reaction may be fatal, but I have work to do. Ralph Durand shall not prosper in his villainy. I will balk his every design."

Already the powerful potion had begun its inspiriting work. The invalid seemed to become a new man all of a sudden. The magical draught brought the color to his face, made his eyes sparkle, endowed him with remarkable strength. He arose from his chair, tottered to the cabinet in one corner of the apartment, unlocked it, drew forth a somber-looking metal box, and, clasping this tightly under his arm, he parted the draperies at one end of the room, and disappeared, with a last apprehensive glance at the window, where the sinister face of the plotter he



P. 29.—He threw up his thin white hands and sank back.

so dreaded had appeared a moment or two previous.

One minute passed by — two — three. Then, gasping, tottering, white-faced Gideon Vernon re-entered the room, staggered to his chair, sank into it exhausted, but the precious box of treasure was no longer in his possession.

“Safe!” he almost chuckled. “A barren welcome will the sordid Durand secure from his sneaking visit to the villa. What is that?”

The shadows of eventide were deepening, but a broad flare of light in the west outlined the window frame. A darker shadow crossed it. Assuming form and substance, the haggard, venomous features of Durand were revealed.

This time he crept over the sill and gained the floor of the sick-room.

The invalid, motionless, watched him. The plotter directed a keen glance at the chair and its occupant, evidently adjudged Vernon to be asleep, and cautiously approached the self-same cabinet that Vernon had denuded of its precious treasure less than five minutes before.

He opened it, glared into it, felt in it. Then, a hoarse, grating cry of disappointment and rage escaped his lips.

"Not there!" he hissed, fiercely, "and yet I saw him put it there this very afternoon. Has all my patient watching been in vain? No! no! I must, I will have at least that much of his miserly wealth, if I wrench the secret from his craven heart."

Durand recoiled as if dealt a blow, as, in mocking response to his vivid soliloquy, a low, rasping laugh rang derisively upon his ears.

He stared in wonderment, and then, in baffled rage and hate at the chair, for its occupant had moved, and he saw the keen, glittering eyes of the man whose peace of mind he sought to destroy, fixed contemptuously upon him.

"You—awake?" he gasped.

"Yes, Ralph Durand, I have been watching you," spoke Vernon, in a marvelously calm tone of voice. "You are baffled, beaten!"

With a cry of unutterable anger, the villain sprang to the invalid's side.

"You know what I came for, Gideon Ver-

non!" he hissed, malignantly. "Speak! where is your treasure-box?"

"Find out!"

"Be careful! I am a desperate man."

"You cannot harm me."

"Can I not? I can choke the life from your body!"

"And I can cry for help. What! you dare."

"The box! where is it? give it up, I say, or" —

"Hel-p!"

The word gurgled in the invalid's throat. It died to a moan. Enraged beyond measure, Durand had dragged Vernon from his chair. Maddened with spite and discomfiture, he dealt him a heavy blow, and then, as he fancied that he saw a form at the door that led out upon the veranda, he sprang to the window, leaped through it, and disappeared in the deepening darkness of the night.

A form had appeared at the door in question, the figure of a young man. It was Sydney Vance, pretty Gladys Vernon's lover. He had come as he told her he would in the interview in the garden, determined on surprising Mr. Vernon alone, resolved to atone

for his past coldness, and heal the breach of enmity that existed between himself and the uncle of the woman he loved.

Fatal moment ! He had not seen the fugitive Durand, but, as he advanced, he made out the gasping, writhing form on the floor of the apartment.

“ Mr. Vernon ! ” he ejaculated, alarmed and leaning over the invalid. “ You have fallen ”——

“ No ! ” gasped Vernon. “ Struck down — murdered — dying ! I have received my death-blow ”——

“ Your death-blow,” repeated the petrified Sydney.

“ Yes ! yes ! ”

“ You mean ”——

“ Ralph Durand ! Quick ! after him ! apprehend the assassin ! There is not a moment to lose ”——

“ Which way did he go ? ”

The prostrate man could not speak. A sudden rigidity seized his limbs, and he only pointed spasmodically toward the open window, and fell back, the hue of death in his aged face.

It was at that moment that the door of the

room connecting with the hall opened, and Gladys Vernon, bearing a lighted lamp, crossed its threshold.

Behind her, bearing a tea-tray, came the housekeeper. Sydney saw Gladys, but, intent on following out Vernon's orders, he disappeared.

A frightful scream escaped Gladys' lips as she took in all the bewildering and terrifying scene—the prostrate uncle gasping in the agony of death on the floor, her flying lover.

The housekeeper, alarmed, pressed close after her.

"Uncle! uncle! oh! what does this mean?" she shrieked, as she noticed a lurid mark on his brow.

"Murder—that villain," gasped Vernon.

"And he, Sydney, here!"

"Yes, yes. I was struck—down. Sydney Vance—he"——

The dying man meant to say that Sydney was pursuing the real assassin. Oh, fatal weakness! To the ears of the appalled housekeeper, his last incoherent utterance ascribed the crime of the moment to Gladys Vernon's lover!

“Uncle, dear uncle — help! help! help!”

Twice-repeated, the frantic utterance rang out, for, with a heart-rending moan, just then, Gideon Vernon sank back — dead!

It was this blood-curdling cry that had aroused Jera Le Britta, and he dashed into the room a minute later, to witness the most exciting tableau of all his varied existence.

CHAPTER VIII.

DOOMED!

LE BRITTA was too staggered to speak, as he looked down at the lifeless form of old Gideon Vernon, and surveyed the distracted Gladys as she folded his motionless form in her frantic clasp.

The housekeeper, white as a sheet, seemed stricken dumb with terror. The torn curtain at the window, the rifled cabinet, the overturned invalid chair, the mark on the dead man's brow, the general disorder of the apartment, all spoke of crime, deadly assault, robbery, murder!

The incoherent ravings of the frantic Gladys thrilled the startled and appalled

photographer to sudden horror. She wailed out her grief at her uncle's death, vainly calling upon him to return to life, praying for the punishment of his cruel assassin. She moaned that she had seen Sydney Vance at the window — she recalled Vernon's last dying allusion to him, and in sheer bewilderment Le Britta turned to the housekeeper.

“What does she say — she saw her lover, Sydney Vance, here?”

“Yes,” gasped the affrighted woman, “she saw him fly.”

“And Mr. Vernon”——

“Accused him of murdering him.”

“Oh, impossible!” gasped the incredulous Le Britta. “But murder has been done. The assassin cannot have gone far. Quick, Mrs. Darrell! remove that distracted creature from this room, quiet her, restrain her, or I fear for her mind. I will scour the shrubbery and summon help. Yes, he is dead,” murmured Le Britta in a broken tone of voice, as he gazed at the white, colorless face of Vernon.

He sprang through the window, and for half an hour threaded every maze in the garden and its vicinity. All in vain! If Sydney

Vance had been there, he had mysteriously disappeared. As to Durand, whose handiwork in the crime of the hour Le Britta was quick to suspect, he had vanished as effectually as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

He hurried to the nearest house and announced the tragedy of the hour to its startled inmates. Soon a messenger was speeding on horseback for the village, with orders to secure a physician.

He arrived an hour later, as fast as breathless haste could bring him. Neighbors had crowded the house in the meantime. Like wildfire the news spread that old Gideon Vernon had been murdered and robbed.

The house was a scene of pitiful commotion, but amid it all, feeling the grave responsibility that rested upon him, Jera Le Britta kept his head, and tried to act calmly.

Gladys, immersed in grief and emotion, had been removed to her own room. The housekeeper had been warned by Le Britta not to mention what she had heard concerning Sydney Vance. In his own mind Le Britta had formed a reasonable theory as to the crime. Its perpetrator, beyond doubt, to his way of

thinking, was the villain Durand. Sydney had come to make his peace with Vernon, had appeared in time to be mistaken for the murderer, had certainly gone to pursue the real assassin; but why did he not come back to the house of grief to explain it all?

The doctor pronounced Gideon Vernon beyond the reach of all earthly ministrations, and Gladys in a dangerously hysterical condition. He administered a soothing draught to the distracted girl, and left directions with Le Britta to send for him if she got worse. Then Le Britta sent the housekeeper to attend to her young mistress, and it was not until nearly midnight that he sat down in the apartment adjoining the sick room to keep his solitary watch over the dead, the undertaker having arrived from the village, and prepared the body for burial the following day.

It had been a hard day for him, and that day had scored a most distressing termination for the fair young girl he had hoped to aid in her troubles.

Tap! tap!

Le Britta arose as he heard some one knock gently at the outside porch door. He

opened it. A man, roughly dressed but honest-faced, stepped across the threshold.

"Who are you?" demanded Le Britta, suspiciously.

"An officer from the village. I heard about the case when the doctor was sent for, and came soon after."

"I did not see you," remarked Le Britta, a trifle uneasily, hoping to evade official investigation of the case until he had conversed with Gladys, and learned of the whereabouts of Sydney Vance.

"No, that's true. I always work in the dark on a dubious case of this kind."

"Dubious?"

"Exactly. Wasn't it murder?" demanded the officer, sharply.

"I think it was."

"Think? You know it! Come, sir! I understand your motive in trying to shield a person presumably innocent, but it's no use."

"Then"——

"The murderer is, of course, Sydney Vance."

Le Britta's heart sank. He was certain that this could not be—that young Vance was only the victim of circumstances, but

how to prove that fact, once the hue and cry was raised over the person last seen in the room with the murdered man.

“Why do you think that?” he faltered.

“I don’t think it, I know it,” proclaimed the officer, stanchly.

“Why?”

“The housekeeper’s story”——

“What! she has been talking?” ejaculated Le Britta, in dismay.

“I made her, and her story proves beyond any doubt that there was a quarrel between Vernon and young Vance, that Miss Vernon saw Vance fly from the room, that the last words of the murdered man charged Vance with the crime.”

“But, the evidence”——

“Is plain. The testimony of Miss Vernon alone,” announced the officer, in tones of pitiless, professional precision, “unsupported by any other evidence, will send Sydney Vance to the gallows!”

There was a heart-rending moan in the hallway without, and then a fall.

And, springing to the door, with consternation and alarm, Le Britta saw Gladys Ver-

non lying senseless on the rich axminster carpet.

She had stolen from her room to speak to him ; she had lingered at that half-open door.

She had learned all. She knew that her lover, her innocent lover, was charged with hideous, baleful crime, and her words had doomed him !

CHAPTER IX.

BLANK !

THE funeral was over, the last sad rites had been performed, dust unto dust had been returned, and after a stormy existence of power, pride and pain, old Gideon Vernon had gone the way of all flesh.

There were very few at the ceremony — the attendant physician, Doctor Winston ; the village lawyer, several of the neighbors only. Vernon had lived almost the life of a recluse, and had never been the man to make many friends.

Gladys had not gone with the carriages to the cemetery. When Le Britta had found her outside the door of the room in which he

had held that startling interview with the village police officer, it was to convey her to her own apartment again, where she revived only to go through the most poignant hysterical grief and despair.

The doctor, again summoned, ordered positively that she be kept under the influence of sedatives until after the funeral, and that the housekeeper should keep close watch and ward over her afflicted young mistress.

Le Britta was nearly worn out with sleeplessness and care. He felt that the gloom of the hour would abide with him for a long time to come, and he was glad when the body of the murdered man was consigned to its tomb. The inquest, the commotion, the prying, watchful officer ; all this jarred on his finer sensibilities, and he breathed a sigh of infinite relief as he returned to the house from the cemetery, to observe Doctor Winston, Mr. Munson, the lawyer, seated in the library, looking grave and thoughtful.

At the door outside, too, Le Britta met the officer.

"Have you found any trace of the supposed assassin?" inquired the photographer.

"None," responded the other.

"Is not that singular?"

"Not at all, seeing that a box filled with money is missing. Sydney Vance had good reason to fly and hide with that treasure."

"You will persist that he is the criminal?"

"The coroner's jury decided so on my plain statement. What would a court of justice say with the added testimony of Miss Vernon?"

What? indeed! Le Britta's heart sank at the thought. Should young Vance ever return, it would be to fill a felon's cell. Perhaps, realizing all this, and knowing that Gladys' welfare was menaced by the real murderer, he was determined to conceal himself, to preserve his liberty, rather than face an overwhelming, crushing accusation he could not refute.

In the library, Doctor Winston and Mr. Munson bowed gravely, as Le Britta entered the room, and the latter remarked:

"I do not know what this afflicted family would have done without you, Mr. Le Britta."

The photographer bowed deprecatingly.

"Circumstances forced my slight services," he said, unaffectedly.

"True, but they have been valuable ones.

Doctor Winston has just had a conversation with poor Gladys. He tells me there is a new will, and much more about a dreaded enemy of Mr. Vernon, that induces me to take immediate steps, as his local legal adviser, to secure to her the rights the will gives her."

"Eminently proper," nodded the doctor.

"Yes, I think so," asserted Le Britta.

"Gladys says she will be here in a few moments, weak as she is, realizing the necessity of following out the wishes of her dead uncle, anxious not to detain you from your business, and desirous of leaving this gloomy house to make her home with your fellow-guardian, Doctor Winston here."

Le Britta's face brightened, as he realized that under the charge of the benevolent old physician and his wife, Gladys would find a safe and pleasant home.

He hastened to open the door, as a faint tapping sounded upon its outside portals.

Gladys Vernon, pale, and with eyes drooping from long grief, entered the apartment.

She pressed Le Britta's proffered hand with grateful emotion, and then, half-hiding her face in her hand, sat like one performing a painful duty near the table.

"We will only go through the mere formalities of examining the will, Miss Vernon," spoke Mr. Munson, in a kindly tone of voice. "We will read it, verify the signatures, and I will take it and file it in the court, to make it safe from any interference of interested outsiders. You understand?"

Gladys murmured a faint affirmative.

"Doctor Winston will convey you at once to his home. The housekeeper can retain charge here until we decide what to do with the mansion."

"Dispose of it, close it up!" breathed Gladys, in a fear-filled, shuddering tone. "I could never live again beneath the roof where my beloved uncle met his doom, where my heart broke"—

She paused, amid hot, blinding tears.

"If your thoughts are of the accused murderer," interrupted Le Britta, "take courage, Miss Vernon! You know, and I know, that Sydney Vance is innocent; you know, and I know, the real assassin. Fear not! The truth is mighty, and it shall prevail! All that justice can do to trace this terrible crime to its real perpetrator, will be done.

"Try not to distress yourself over all that

just now," spoke the lawyer. "Your uncle made a new will, Miss Vernon."

"Yes — last night."

"Where is it?"

"He gave it to me for safe-keeping."

Gladys drew the same enveloped and sealed document from her pocket that Le Britta had seen her uncle give her the day previous.

"It has not left your possession since it was delivered to you?" demanded Mr. Munson.

"Oh! no."

"This is the same document—you can swear to it."

"Yes, sir."

"These are merely formal questions," proceeded the lawyer. "We all know the contents of the will, but I will read it over for form's sake."

Rip — rip — rip. The somber silence of the room was broken only by Gladys' soft crying, and the tearing open of the end of the envelope.

The lawyer drew out the single document it contained.

He opened it, glanced at it, stared at it,

glared at it, arose to his feet, and uttered a quick ejaculation.

“Why! what’s the matter, Munson?” demanded the doctor, startled at his companion’s sudden excitement of manner.

“This paper”——

“The will?”

“It is no will!”

“Why”——

“There is some mistake.”

“Mistake?” murmured Le Britta, not unprepared for strange surprises under that strange roof, after all the extraordinary occurrences that had signalized his brief sojourn there.

“Yes, this is no will. Look!”

The lawyer held out the paper.

His own face was perturbed, the doctor stared bewilderingly, Le Britta’s eyes glowed with dark suspicion, Gladys gasped affrightedly.

For the page, one side and reverse, front and back, was — blank!

CHAPTER X.

THE PLOTTER'S VICTORY.

"BLANK!" ejaculated the doctor, dubiously.

"Blank!" murmured Gladys, with incredulity.

"Blank," assented Mr. Munson, turning the paper in his hand over and over. "See for yourselves!"

"Impossible!" gasped Gladys, startled out of her grief by the remarkable development of the moment. "Uncle gave it to me, I saw it written, sealed. The envelope has never left my possession since."

Blank wonderment and consternation were depicted on every face, save that of Le Britta.

He had risen to his feet. His brows knit, his lips set sternly, he stood like one studying out a difficult problem.

"Please allow me to examine that document, Mr. Munson," he spoke at last.

There was an ominous something in his manner that silenced the others, and enchained their attention.

With the eye of an analyst he was scanning the blank sheet of paper.

"A slight discoloration. All form blended into an indistinguishable mass," he half murmured. "The fiber unbroken, a slight scent of acid. Gentlemen," to the engrossed and watching doctor and lawyer, "trickery has been at work here, jugglery, plotting!"

"You also think it is the same paper upon which Mr. Vernon drew out his will?" queried the lawyer.

"I know it."

"But, it is blank?"

"It was not blank last evening."

"Then" —

"Wait here a moment. I think I understand what has occurred."

Le Britta left the apartment, and went straight to the now vacant sick-room.

He took up the oxidized ink-stank that had played a part in the writing of the will, and that self-same part of a correspondence equipment which the reader will remember had been handled by the lurking Ralph Durand.

He returned to the library with it in his hand, placed it on the table, dipped a piece of paper into the contents of the ink wells,

smelled, it, tasted it, dried it at the lamp, and then sat down with a discomposed yet satisfied face.

"It is as I feared," he murmured.

"What do you mean?" demanded the doctor, on the keen edge of vivid suspense.

"Trickery!"

"Explain yourself."

"I will. I noticed yesterday, when Mr. Vernon had completed writing the will, that the ink looked faded. You remember, Miss Vernon, your uncle complained of it himself."

"Yes, and I attributed it to his failing eyesight," murmured Gladys.

"And I feared disturbing and annoying him in his nervous condition," said Le Britta.

"The ink he used was no ink, it was not even a stain. Some one had substituted for the real ink an acid, a volatile chemical—none other than tincture of iodine."

"But it wrote," began the lawyer.

"Yes, it resembles faded brown ink, and so deceived us. It does not even penetrate the fibers of the paper, and within twenty-four hours it vanishes, evaporates, leaving no trace. I am sorry, but we have been tricked.

The will is no will at all — it is mere waste paper !”

Gladys looked frightfully startled.

“Can we not prove that he did write a new will,” she began.

“No,” dissented the lawyer. “Unless you can produce a new will, written, signed, witnessed, the old will is valid.”

“And that man, who probably connived at all this,” wailed Gladys, sudderingly, “Ralph Durand, is my legal guardian.”

“Oh ! that cannot be !” gasped Le Britta, realizing the full import of Gladys’ words.

“Yes, it is true. Gentlemen, pardon me for playing the eavesdropper, but I am keenly alive to my own rights and interests. I appear to put in my claim as the conservator of dead Gideon Vernon’s estate, and the legal guardian of that young lady — Gladys Vernon !”

The blow had fallen — the denouement had come ! The door had opened, and a new figure had intruded upon the scene.

At him Gladys Vernon stared aghast. It was Ralph Durand !

But no longer the ragged, uncouth tramp ! Arrayed in immaculate broadcloth, clean-

shaven, a perfect fashion-plate of propriety, the marplot of her existence stood revealed.

The wicked eyes flashed triumphantly, the bold lips wore a mocking sneer of victory.

"You look annoyed," he spoke. "You need not be. I come here in entire harmony with the rulings of law and right. This young lady and her picture-making friend may rave about destroyed wills, murdered guardians and all that, but, under the provision of the one and only legal will of dead Gideon Vernon, I now and here take charge of his estate, and of his niece until she attains her majority."

"Lead me from the presence of that man!"

Slowly rising to her feet, Gladys, half-fainting, spoke the words to Le Britta.

"Wait a moment!" cried Durand, in sharp, imperious accent. "You know the plain state of the case. It will be the worse for those who attempt to dislodge or undermine me. I am master here. I will brook no rebellion. Miss Vernon, I will be a friend to you if you allow me, but, strictly, impartially, I shall act the guardian, as directed

by the will of your uncle, now locked up in the strong boxes of his city lawyers."

Dumfounded, the lawyer and the doctor arose to leave the room, as Le Britta returned from leading Gladys to the stairs.

The insolent Durand directed a last sneering word to Le Britta, as the latter accompanied them from the apartment.

We can dispense with your friendly services after this," he said. "I will have your traps packed for you within an hour."

Le Britta bit his lip, but did not reply. He was too overpowered to realize it all just then.

For two hours, outside the mansion grounds, the lawyer, the doctor and the photographer discussed the situation.

"That scoundrel, Ralph Durand, substituted the acid for the ink, he probably murdered Gideon Vernon, he also possibly knows of the fate of Sydney Vance, but what can we do on mere suspicion," spoke the lawyer. "Gentlemen, we must have patience. Doctor, you must feign to gracefully accept the situation, so as to be near Gladys. Mr. Le Britta, you must leave for home at once."

"And Miss Vernon must be left to the

mercy of that monster!" cried Le Britta, excitedly.

"He dare not harm her. Trust me. He shall go through the farce of guardianship, but, before another day is passed, a skillful detective shall be ferreting out all this mystery. You shall hear from me regularly. We are not done with this knave and assassin yet."

Le Britta accompanied his two friends to the village. He tortured his mind all that afternoon for some plan to defeat, to dislodge Ralph Durand. At last, feeling that he could do no more to aid the imperiled Gladys Vernon, that the doctor and lawyer would watch her interests, that the worst that Durand could do would be to pilfer from the estate for the year that intervened until she had attained her majority, he walked back to Hawthorne villa to say good-by to Gladys.

At its portals, the housekeeper met him, with a white, scared face.

She held a folded note between her fingers, which she extended tremulously.

"Oh! Mr. Le Britta!" she gasped. "Miss Gladys"——

"She is worse? she"——

"No, sir, but"——

"Mercy! Gone! fled!" ejaculated the petrified Le Britta, as he scanned the note.

Yes, hours since. The brief note, thanking him for his past kindness, told that Gladys Vernon, the orphan's prayer for help and guidance on her lips, had fled forever from the power of Ralph Durand——had gone forth, friendless, homeless, a beggar, to battle alone with the cold, cruel world, beyond the gates of the once-peaceful haven she had called home!

CHAPTER XI.

HOME!

"So ends the most exciting chapter of my life!"

Jera Le Britta spoke the words, two days after the occurrence of the startling events depicted in the preceding chapter.

Once more the tourist, he had paused to view a scene that marked the end of his journey and his brief vacation, at the same time.

From a pretty wooded vale he scanned the landscape, bounded on one side by a thriving

little city, the buildings of which gleamed white and majestic in the bright sunlight.

No wonder his eye sparkled! There, a few years previous, he had come as a stranger. Now, a hundred cordial friends would grasp his hand, and give him a hearty home welcome.

There, his art, his affections, his whole life were centered. No wonder he seemed to emerge from cloudland and gloom into golden sunshine and happiness, for wife, children friends were encompassed within the limits of the town upon which he now gazed.

He loved the little city for its beauty, for its people, for the success it had awarded his patient efforts for appreciation. As in a dream, he saw it, a quarter of a century past, a mere struggling settlement; he saw it, in its prosperous present, a beautiful city of ideal homes and temples of commerce, and, with the eye prophetic, too, he saw a grander city grow from this nucleus of enterprise; he pictured vast industrial palaces, majestic marts of trade, mammoth public edifices, until it had become a queen among the cities of the plain—a haven of wealth, prosperity and peace.

Here he must again take up life, but he could not forget the past. Ah, no! That sympathetic heart of his went back to Hawthorne villa in sad memory. He knew that his nature would not allow him to forget, or to remain idle. As soon as he got his business affairs in shape he would return to see Doctor Winston and Lawyer Munson, and learn what new developments had occurred in the case of the fugitive orphan niece of murdered Gideon Vernon.

Gladys had fled, and the most persistent search had revealed not the slightest trace of her whereabouts.

In her brief letter to Le Britta, she had thanked him for his kindness, but she had stated that she could not remain under the same roof with the assassin of her beloved uncle, she could not linger, to be confronted with her innocent lover, Sydney Vance, and have her involuntary testimony send him to the gallows. She would go to some distant place, she told him, and would work in obscurity until she was eighteen years of age. Then, her own mistress, she would return, to devote life, energies and fortune to hunting down the real criminal, and clear her lover

from the hideous charge circumstances had placed against his fair name.

At Hawthorne villa, secure in his insolence, the scoundrelly Ralph Durand defied lawyer and friends of the missing Gladys. He was comfortably ensconced in a well-feathered nest. He had his scheme to work, wealth was at his disposal, but — with his knowledge of how surely evil brings its own eventual retribution, Jera Le Britta realized that his hour of downfall would yet surely come!

He had packed up his camera, and had not taken a picture since leaving Hawthorne villa. As, now, he neared the neat, pretty house that held all that he regarded as dearest on earth, he tried to put aside his cares concerning Gladys Vernon, to drive away, temporarily, the conviction that he was yet to become again interested in her destiny, as the loving arms of his beautiful wife enfolded him, and two charming tots clambered to his knee.

Smiling faces and hearty handclasps greeted him as, later, he started for his studio. It was located on the main street of the town, and chosen with a view to central location, accessibility and rare requisites of light and

convenience. It seemed like getting back among old friends to enter the elegant reception-room, furnished throughout with neatness and taste, and containing a great variety of superb specimens of the photographic art. The attractive frames and mountings were a study in themselves. Here, the eye feasted upon the rarely-beautiful; here, were ideals of feminine grace and attractiveness—infancy, youth, maturity, old age, of the north land, of the south land, Greek, American, Italian, French, Anglo-Saxon, German, in profile and expression of features—all were represented.

La Britta passed through this gallery of art, crowded with specimens of his own deft handiwork, and passed into the operating room of the studio.

Costly cameras, and all the accessories of the profession, showed in practical profusion here, and engaged in placing the last artistic finishing touches to an expensive picture was a pretty, graceful young lady—the photographer's valued assistant Maud. Her sympathetic face broke into a glad smile of welcome, as she recognized her employer. An artistic workman, graduated from the best

schools of photography, her work was always so realistically true, that she knew that during his brief absence she had followed out the instructions faithfully he had given her, and would win only the highest praise from his lips, for her devoted watch and ward of his interests.

"We expected you two days since," said Maud.

"Yes, but I was delayed unexpectedly," replied Le Britta. "Letters, orders. Here is work for some days to come."

"And here a visitor for some hours to come, I fear," exclaimed Maud, laughingly, as a light footstep sounded in the adjoining apartment. "He has been here inquiring for you every day, as if you were a long-lost son."

"Dick!" ejaculated Le Britta, with a bright smile, extending his hand to a rather tall, handsome, professional-looking man, who crossed the threshold of the operating-room at just that moment, and in whom he recognized his dearest friend, Dr. Richard Milton.

"It's a sight for sore eyes to see you back again," said the young physician, heartily.

Letters and orders were forgotten in the chit-chat of two friends, long parted, for the next hour. Le Britta had requested his charming assistant to open his tourist camera and put the exposures in the developing bath, and an hour later, as Doctor Milton was giving the details of a difficult surgical operation he had just completed, Miss Maud appeared at the door of the room where the two friends sat, with half a dozen glass plates in her hand.

"Ah ! developed them ?" smiled Le Britta. "I'll show you some of the views I took on my tramp, Dick. Here is a storm effect ; here is a waterfall view, and here"——

Jera Le Britta paused as if dealt a sudden blow, and stared like one abruptly bereft of reason at the plate in his fingers.

Like a flash, recalling all the eventful scenes of Hawthorne villa, with a shock, a single glance sent the blood to his heart, and checked immediate utterance.

For, in that single, startled, stunned look at the little glass plate, Jera Le Britta had made the most extraordinary discovery of all his eventful life !

CHAPTER XII.

THE UNEXPECTED.

PHOTOGRAPHY is a wonderful art. In a creative sense, it outstrips any other kindred science with the rapidity and accuracy of its operation ; in a preservative sense, it enables us to perpetuate a fac-simile of the most wonderful crumbling antique specimen of architecture. True to its focus as an arrow to the target, it can always be depended upon, when a skilled hand manipulates the camera.

All this Jera Le Britta had thought of a thousand times. It flashed through his mind now as, staring at the glass negative in his hand, he could scarcely credit the evidence of his senses. Combined with those meditations, however, a new phase of the art had been vividly presented — the unexpected in the photographic.

For the unexpected confronted him. A problem and a surprise greeted his vision. A careful man, a methodical man, no wonder that he was deeply stirred !

In the first place, the plate before him bore outlines marked, vivid, distinct, peculiar.

Furthermore, he had "never pressed the button" to take that picture!

Lastly, the impress on the plate revived all the past regarding his strange adventures at Hawthorne villa with a rush that overpowered him.

First wonder, then speculation, then a dawning, thrilling triumph illumined his eyes.

His companion, startled to silence and curiosity by his strange pose, studied the varying expression of Le Britta's intelligent face with a questioning look.

But Dr. Richard Milton's companion was too engrossed in his penetrating survey of the little glass plate to note extraneous occurrences or distracting influences.

"Wonderful!" he gasped at last, and his quick eyes sought out every line and shadow on the negative.

"Providential!" he whispered to himself, almost reverently, a moment later.

Yes, truly wonderful, truly providential was the manifestation of the moment.

For the plate bore a representation of half the table where he had placed his camera the day of his interview with Gideon Vernon, the dead master of Hawthorne villa.

It did something more — it revealed a pile of books, the medicine case of the recluse, and, propped up across it carelessly, the last valid will and testament of the uncle of missing Gladys Vernon.

“Yes, there it was, line for line, word for word, signatures of witnesses, seals, all! Plain as day, accurate as the original instrument itself, the glass plate bore the chronicle of the precious document that baffled all the evil schemes and pretenses of wicked Ralph Durand, that had been written with tincture of iodine, and, fading out as the schemer had planned, had later presented only a blank, worthless sheet of paper, leaving the plotter master of the situation, and censor of innocent, imperiled Gladys Vernon’s life.

What did it mean, how came that picture in the camera? Of a surety, Jera La Britta had not touched slide, button or shutter since the hour that he took the picture of pretty Gladys in the rain-sparkling arbor, where the evil, sinister face of Ralph Durand had appeared, except to prepare that same picture in a dark room with his ruby lamp at the Vernon mansion.

His keen memory, however, careful of de-

tails, stored well with mental history of the near past, supplied the missing link of augury and conjecture.

He had placed his camera on the table in the sick-room, after showing the invalid, Gideon Vernon, the picture that had revealed to the latter the identity of a dreaded enemy. There it had remained during their long interview. He recalled the signing of the will, he remembered how Gideon Vernon had spread the document out for the ink to dry ere he folded it up and delivered it into the keeping of Gladys Vernon, and he remembered, too, how Gladys, anxious and agitated over all her uncle's excitement, had nervously handled the camera, clicking it unconsciously, until he had laughingly warned her that "it was loaded!"

She must, then, have touched the button at that moment of careless fumbling with the apparatus. By a strange caprice of circumstances, the will lay just within focus of the instrument. Click! snap! the faithful little monitor of photography had done its duty, swiftly and completely. *The will had been photographed!*

The camera had been undisturbed until

Le Britta's arrival home. The energetic Maud had lost no time in carrying out his instructions to develop the pictures it contained. This one had been among them, and here he had come home with a heavy heart for the complications surrounding poor, fugitive Gladys Vernon, while in his possession he unwittingly carried a formidable weapon against the man who had scored a mighty triumph as the king of knaves and prince of plotters.

Well might a thrilling gladness succeed to marveling wonder! As Jera Le Britta realized all that his discovery meant, he forgot that he had come home to attend to business duties, to rest and work ere he again saw the friends of Gladys Vernon. He was no longer the photographer, the friend, the father, the husband, the employer—every chivalrous and generous instinct in his nature aroused, he was the champion of lovely distress, the rival of plotting cruelty, the shrewd, energetic detective, deeply interested in a complicated case, and eager and anxious to wield the new-found power that flashed over his mind like a vivid light, gleaming amid the darkness and gloom of a cheerless, hopeless night.

"I have found the clue!"

He sprang to his feet waving the glass plate dramatically.

Dr. Richard Milton arose simultaneously. He stared in wonder at his friend.

"I don't know whether bromide is strong enough," he remarked.

"Eh!" exclaimed Le Britta, with a start, aroused to the reality of his surroundings. "What are you talking about?"

"I say that bromide may not be strong enough."

"For what?" queried Le Britta, blankly.

"For your nerves. You are either bidding good-by to your senses, or preparing for your debut on the dramatic stage. I say, Jera, old friend! what's the matter with you, anyway? For fully ten minutes you have sat staring at that bit of glass, and rolling your eyes, and muttering, and frowning, and smiling. Allow me to feel your pulse."

"Oh, I see!" smiled Le Britta. "Pardon, doctor, but I have been shocked, stunned, amazed. If you were in my place"——

"Put me there, then," interrupted the doctor, keenly.

"Eh! how?"

"By telling me what is on your mind."

"Good! I should have done so soon, anyway. Yes, your advice will help me. Sit down. I want to tell you a story."

Rapidly, succinctly, Jera Le Britta detailed every event of his experience since that mysterious day when he had first met the Vernons.

Wonder-eyed, interested, excited, the sympathetic, impressionable doctor listened. Such a narrative had never greeted his ears before. Unconsciously an orator and an actor, the accompanying gestures of Le Britta, the dramatic intonation of a man deeply concerned in the case under discussion, rendered the recital as emotional and effective as a thrilling scene in a drama acted out upon the mimic stage.

When his friend came to the discovery of the hour, the doctor could scarcely contain himself for excitement.

"Jera!" he cried. "It seems incredible. And you call yourself a photographer? Why, man! you'd make your fortune as a detective!"

"If my efforts can baffle that scoundrel, Ralph Durand, and restore to poor Gladys

Vernon her wronged lover, Sydney Vance, I shall be content to be considered what you like," responded Le Britta, seriously. "Now then, you have heard the story."

"And I have listened to every word of it with the deepest interest and wonder."

"Then weigh them carefully."

"I have done so."

"And your advice?"

Doctor Milton shook his head slowly but resolutely.

"I advise you?" he murmured, deprecatingly. "No, no, old friend! A man who can do what you have done in this case, needs no adviser, your duty is plain."

"You mean?"

"To go straight back to Hawthorne villa."

"With the plate?"

"With the plate, that proves all you can swear to about the will. Why! with such formidable evidence, what court in christendom would doubt that Gideon Vernon intended to dispossess that Durand of his power as guardian?"

"But is the photograph of a will valid—is its evidence irrefutable?"

"I hardly know. Suffice it, that it would

baffle Durand. Produced in court, with your story, it would place Durand under such deep suspicion, as the person who juggled with the original document, that he would either be divested of his fraudulently-obtained authority, or placed under the strict surveillance of justice. Le Britta, we need you here. The town needs you. A man like you, with your genial, encouraging ways, brisk, business facilities, and rapid, turning over of capital, is no unimportant element in its commercial economy. Your friends miss you, you belong to us, and to your family, but that poor girl, Gladys, needs a champion. At one stroke, you may be able to frighten Durand away. Go back to Hawthorne villa, I say, complete your chivalrous record by a last good deed. I needn't tell you that. A man of your kind heart and noble impulses could not rest if you thought any sacrifice would benefit the persecuted and orphaned. Go! I feel sanguine you have solved the problem of that innocent young girl's life, in the discovery of the photograph of the last will and testament of Gideon Vernon."

Jera Le Britta assumed a serious, determined expression. He was wearied. He

longed for the rest, the comfort, the contentment of home, but duty seemed to point the way back the *via dolorosa* he had come.

He regarded the pile of orders and unfinished pictures on a table near by with a sigh, he thought of the discomforts of a journey with no pleasing anticipations.

"I will go," he said, simply. "I will see what power lies in this precious little glass negative to pave the way to justice, and right a great wrong."

CHAPTER XIII.

GOOD-BY !

JERA LE BRITTA went to a cabinet as he expressed his new determination, and proceeded to secure the glass negative safely. That little article of furniture had every requisite ready at hand to pack photographs and their concomitants for preservation or transmission through the mails, and he soon had the precious plate provided with safe coverings, secure from risk of mar or breakage, and encased in a neat envelope.

The operation, methodical and neat, was

characteristic of the man. He was careful in small things. That was the key-note of his success. "A time and a place for everything," was his motto, and, excited and anxious as he was, he made sure of the safety of the negative, transferred it to his pocket, and closed the cabinet.

It contained an elegant line of stationery, cards, envelopes and the like, all bearing his name in script, a bold, striking signature, formed in a soft shade of red embossed letters. The material of the stationery, too, was of the finest grade. The cards were bought to wear and look well — no ragged edges, no split filaments. The outer envelopes for holding photographs were of rice or linen paper, giving a tone and finish to everything that left his establishment.

He announced to Miss Maud his intention of leaving home at once again to be gone for several days.

The dainty artiste made a wry grimace of mock despair. Her deft, delicate fingers never shirked work, but she knew how weighty were the responsibilities of the business, how harmonious and smooth were its

operations with the firm, self-reliant, guiding hand of her employer to rule and navigate.

"I am sorry, but I imagine you can get through with the orders while I am gone," spoke Le Britta, kindly.

"I will try," murmured Maud, "and do my best."

"You always do that, Maud. We must deliver all orders on time."

"But which first? There are some photographs for that man who brought his whole family here. You remember—the laborer with eleven children, a mother-in-law and four nephews. His can wait, can they not? I can have them ready on time, only he is anxious to have them before time."

"Try and accommodate him, Maud."

"But he ordered a cheaper grade of pictures."

"Never mind; they may be 'cheaper' in price, and he may not be able to pay as well as a millionaire. All the more reason for doing him a good piece of work. We will make him happy by giving him a group that will speak with life. We do no 'cheap' work here. I make the honest fellow a present of half the pictures. No picture, for rich

or poor, must be slighted. All must be of even artistic grade. He complimented our skill and reputation by coming to us. Even if he is not a profitable customer, let us delight in doing a little charity work, and yet make him feel that he is not receiving such. He is anxious for his pictures ; finish them first of all."

Le Britta had touched upon a point that was almost a hobby with him—cheap pictures. He never made such. He had seen too many photographs of an inferior quality, to wish to emulate his mediocre competitors. Cheap work, he well knew, meant hurried work ; hurried for the deluded sitter, hurried for the artist, thereby disturbing his delicate equilibrium of touch, and degrading high artistic possibilities. Proper care was always a necessary adjunct to proper adjustment of focus. There must be no neglect in posing and lighting, no inferior chemicals employed, no rude retouching, no careless printing. Art educates, refines, cultivates and develops the mind, and careful adherence to its dictates infuses capacity, ability, faithfulness. Those who desire the best results in art must expect to offer reasonable compensation

for its exercise. Le Britta realized all this. He formulated his ideas on this basis. He refused, as an artist of capability, intelligence and skill, with large capital invested and with a proud reputation to sustain, to meet the competition of the obscure itinerant with nothing of these, and make "cheap" pictures. In the photographic art, invention and discovery had reduced the cost of production until all could enjoy the best results at a moderate price, and when he did make happy some honest wage-earner with small charges, it was a voluntary charity of his generous heart.

There were mournful faces at the pretty home when Le Britta announced the urgency of an immediate departure, but the soft, gentle glance of his true and loving wife to whom he told all his eventful story, satisfied him more than ever that he was on the straight path of duty.

"Go, dear Jera," she urged, earnestly. "Always doing good, ever forgetting self! Poor girl! Do not lose any time in trying to restore her to her friends, in bringing to time that horrible Durand; and, Jera, if you should find her, tell the poor child that she

shall have a welcome here always. How my heart pities her in her orphaned loneliness and peril! Oh, Jera! when I think of how happy we are, safe, comfortable, surrounded by friends, I long to give the poor, innocent dove a home among us."

"Papa s'ant do!" announced the baby of the family, doughtily striving to lock a door against his father's departure.

"Oh, dear! more waiting and watching," pouted the eldest, a bright-faced girl of eight. "Papa, it's real mean of you."

But a royal "trot horse to market" for number one, and the promise of a present for domineering number two, enabled Le Britta to escape with hair uncrumpled, followed by the serious, loving "Heaven speed you!" from the lips of the most beautiful of all the beautiful women he had ever met.

His little hand-bag packed with a few necessaries for a two day's journey, Le Britta stopped on his way at the office of his friend, Doctor Milton.

"Well, all ready?" queried the disciple of Esculapius.

"Yes. I shall take the train in half an hour."

"And return?"

"To-morrow, I hope."

"What is your plan?"

"I hardly know yet. I shall see Mr. Vernon's lawyer and present my evidence, and be guided by his advice. There's a knock at the door, doctor."

Doctor Milton opened the door at the summons. A bare-footed, excited urchin stood there, his great goggle-eyes rolling—breathless, incoherent.

"Doc-tor! Come at onct!"

"Come where?" demanded Doctor Milton.

"To the grug store. Man run away and wagon got hurt—no, I mean wagon ran away and man got hurt. Sent for you right off!"

"I'll be there in a minute. I must bid you good-by, Jera."

Doctor Milton caught up his surgical case and put on his hat. Le Britta accompanied him to the street.

"Some case of trifling injury—man stunned or ankle sprained, I suppose," spoke the doctor.

Le Britta went his way. If he had only

known! but we never know in this busy, changing, fateful world of ours.

If he had only known, the barefooted urchin was a messenger of fate.

For, had Jera Le Britta accompanied Dr. Richard Milton to his new patient, the course of many lives would have been affected then and there.

Destiny plays strange caprices in the plot and counterplot of our lives, and the man just injured by a runaway, was fated to be an important element in the mystery and miseries surrounding the fugitive Gladys Vernon.

All unconscious of this, however, thinking only of the clue he possessed and the duty imperative of the hour, Jera Le Britta went his way.

CHAPTER XIV.

ONLY A TRAMP.

DR. RICHARD MILTON, when he left his friend Le Britta, proceeded rapidly in the direction of the "grug" store.

His kind, sympathetic face grew more seri-

ous as he realized that his services might soon be enlisted in a matter of life or death.

Clean-shaven, the contour of his face resembling some of those profiles one sees on old Roman coins, a physiognomist would have ascribed a remarkably even temperament to this young man.

Not that he lacked fire, only the profession he had undertaken was one the deep seriousness of which he fully realized. Long companionship with Le Britta had fostered the naturally noble sentiments of his mind, and he had developed into a kind, just and honorable man.

There was a crowd around the door of the drug store, excited men, women and children were jostling one another and striving to peer in through the windows, while the proprietor of the establishment held the door shut and ordered the people away.

“Here comes the doctor!” was the simultaneous announcement of half-a-dozen voices, and room was made for Doctor Milton to reach the door.

Inside, lying upon the marble-tiled floor, his head supported by a cushion, lay a man, motionless and bleeding.

A glance told Doctor Milton that he belonged to that genus known as tramp. His frowsy head of hair, unkempt beard, worn-out shoes, dusty, travel-stained and tattered attire, evidenced the fact that Doctor Milton would have to add another charity-patient to the long list.

"Hurt pretty badly, doctor, I guess," whispered the druggist.

"How did it occur?" queried the doctor, mechanically, kneeling by the side of his patient.

"Runaway horse and wagon. Caught him on the dead run, and knocked him—twenty feet, I should think."

Doctor Milton felt the pulse of the insensible man; he lifted one eyelid with his thumb and forefinger; he pressed the tips of his fingers until the blood showed under the nails. Then he shook his head slowly.

"No temporary treatment here," he murmured, convincedly. "The man's insensibility is not the result of a nervous shock. Something more serious, I fear. Let us see as to his injuries."

There was a slight scalp-wound, but beside it was an immense protuberance. As the

doctor lifted the man's arm, however, he started despite himself.

From elbow to wrist, one arm had the flesh scraped off as clean as if a knife had shaved it. For all the world it resembled a spring sapling, with a section of the fresh green bark peeled clear to the white wooden core.

"This man needs long, careful attention," he remarked, arising to his feet. "Where can he be taken?"

"You can have my back room, if you like," remarked the druggist.

"No, it must be to some permanent, comfortable place. Have you a stretcher?"

"We can improvise one."

"Please do so."

Doctor Milton surveyed his patient thoughtfully. He was "only a tramp!" only one of those poor, homeless fellows who wander from town to town, and from city to city, migratory as the birds, and like the birds, included in that blessed benison — "Your Father cares for the sparrows of the field, and will He not care for you?"

With the practiced eye of a surgeon he readily recognized the emergency of the case. A fellow-being's life, however worthless, de-

pended on immediate active treatment. In a flash he decided what to do, and followed the dictates of his great humane heart.

The druggist and his subordinates soon brought in a rudely-improvised litter. Upon it, following the doctor's direction, and aided by him, they placed the unconscious man. He never stirred or spoke.

"Get four strong men to carry him," spoke Milton.

"Where to, doctor?" queried the druggist.

"To my office."

"Surely," ejaculated the man, with a start, "you will not burden yourself with his care!"

"Will any one else?"

"I fear not."

"Then I cannot see him die. Gently, boys!" as ready helpers were summoned from the throng outside to the side of the litter.

They bore their inanimate burden from the store and down the street. The doctor leading the way, they reached his office.

Doctor Milton prepared a couch for him, and upon it he was placed.

Alone with his patient, he became the stern, practical surgeon once more.

For nearly an hour he worked at him, forcing medicine between his lips, hypodermically injecting stimulants, applying bandages to the great protuberance at the base of the brain.

"Temperature, pulse and respiration better," murmured the doctor. "Now for the arm."

He took up his scalpel and scissors twice, and laid them aside again. He became thoughtful, serious.

"It cannot be done," he soliloquized. "It is either a well arm, a useful arm in time, or a crippled, torturing limb. If it is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well. I will not touch it till I have considered. Here is an experiment worthy the skill of a Mackenzie or a Gunn."

Doctor Milton simply applied a loose, wet cloth to the scraped, distended arm.

"If the man recovers consciousness completely in an hour, the injury to the nerve centers are only temporary," he murmured. "If not, he will die. Ah! he moves."

Yes, with a low moan of pain, the patient stirred slightly. Then he opened his eyes.

"I've got to get back there!" fell distinctly on the dead silence of the room.

Doctor Milton hurriedly approached the couch.

"Get where, my poor fellow?" he queried, gently.

"To — to that place."

"What place?"

"Hawthorne villa."

"Great goodness!" ejaculated the doctor, recoiling involuntarily. "What in the world does this mean?"

His mind full of Le Britta's vivid story, the mention of the home of Gladys Vernon startled him indescribably.

He was deeply amazed, excited, curious, too, but, as he gazed keenly at the tramp, he saw that although semi-consciousness had supervened, his mind was still groping, and he spoke only automatically upon some theme powerfully present in his mind.

"The papers are all right!"

Those were the next words of the sufferer.

"I had them written by different persons. Couldn't trust one person, couldn't trust one person, couldn't trust one person!"

The monologue died in a low murmur.

The eyes closed, the man's body resumed its rigidity.

Of a sudden, however, as the absorbed Doctor Milton gazed, the invalid gave a terrible start. The first conscious recognition of his injuries, of pain, seemed to possess his senses, for he drew up his injured arm in a wincing, tortured way, his eyes glared wildly, and he choked out :

“I remember! I was hurt. Oh! send for a doctor. I can't die, I wont die, with that secret mine! I'll pay a hundred, a thousand dollars, only save me. I'm rich! rich! thousands are mine, if I can only get the strength to crawl back to Hawthorne villa. The secret, the papers! oh!—hh—h—h!”

Back he fell again, this time like a dead weight.

Mystified, startled, Dr. Richard Milton regarded him wonderingly. Then, as a sudden flush stole over the patient's face, and his breathing changed, the doctor examined him more closely.

“What did he mean?” he ejaculated. “Le Britta, more shrewd than I, would trace a wonderful significance in those incoherent

words. This man will not tell for a time, I am thinking! Fever? He's in for a long siege of it. Well, I'll save him if it is possible."

The man did not revive again that night, nor the next day, nor the one following.

When partial consciousness did come, it was to engulf the homeless sufferer in the embrace of a hot, wasting fever, and his wild utterances bore no further reference to his boasted wealth or Hawthorne villa.

Doctor Milton grew restive under the constant care he required, but he was not the man to ignore a duty once assumed.

"Only a tramp!" he adjudged the wretched sufferer; but, although he little dreamed it, he was "entertaining an angel unawares!"

CHAPTER XV.

FACE TO FACE.

JERA LE BRITTA reached the bustling little town where the lawyer of the Vernon estates resided late that same evening, but went to the village hotel and deferred calling upon him till the following day.

Exhausted nature played the photographer a sad trick, however. He slept beyond the anticipated hour, and with no little trepidation observed that it was after ten o'clock the following morning when he awoke.

Refreshed, however, by his long recuperating sleep, and fortified by a hearty breakfast, Le Britta started forth, his head clear, his energies revived, his courage dauntless, to enter the lists against the ex-tramp and schemer, who sat like some bird of ill omen brooding over the fortunes of Hawthorne villa.

Disappointment baffled his efforts to find the lawyer. The latter was at court at an adjoining village. Le Britta decided to go there after him. Then, on second reflection, he determined to await his return, and then, a sudden idea coming to his mind, he started with resolute face and a confident heart in the direction of Hawthorne villa itself.

"Yes, I'll risk it!" he soliloquized. "It can do no possible harm. It may be my final interview with Ralph Durand, and as I am in no wise afraid of him, I will give him a bit of wholesome advice, if nothing more. I hold a weapon in my hand which may

frighten, unman him, drive him away. The effect of the photograph upon him will be a guide as to our future movements."

Cogitating over this course, Le Britta reached the villa. He paused at its gate to regard several persons in the garden.

One was the redoubtable Ralph Durand himself. He was arrayed in flashy garments, and his flushed, brutal face, early as was the hour, showed unmistakable evidences of intoxication. He was ordering two servants to do some work about the garden.

"Rip up those beastly roses!" he commanded, "and pull away those hideous vines from the veranda. We want no sentimental gew-gaws of shrubbery about here."

Le Britta's eyes flashed with indignation, as he realized the power of this uncultured boor to destroy Gladys' beloved flowers. Calming himself, however, for the impending interview he was determined to precipitate, he opened the gate and walked up the graveled path.

"Hello!" ejaculated Durand, staring insolently at his visitor; "you here!"

"As you see," responded Le Britta, quietly.

Durand's brow grew dark and forbidding as a thunder-cloud.

"I thought I ordered you to remain off these premises," he continued, in an insulting, aggressive tone of voice.

"You did."

"You'd better obey me!"

"I have business here, sir."

"You have what?"

"Business — urgent, important, personal."

"Out with it then!"

"Not here. I wish to see you alone."

"Oh! that's it?" muttered Durand. "I don't see what 'business' you can have with me? I'm king here now. The law can deal with that meddler Vance, and as to Gladys, if you've come to intercede for her, its no use. I'm her legally-appointed guardian. Let her come back and behave herself, and its all right."

"I have come on behalf of neither of the persons you name," spoke Le Britta. "As to Gladys, she will never, I am assured, return while you are here. As to Sydney Vance — no one seems to know where he is."

"Don't, eh?" sneered Durand, coarsely.

"No, unless it is yourself."

The shot told. Durand changed color. He clenched his hands angrily, then, repressing the natural antagonistic instincts of his quarrelsome nature, he said, insolently:

"Well, come in, and get through with this 'business' of yours as quickly as you can. Your room is better than your company in my house, I can tell you that!"

Jera Le Britta subdued the rising anger and indignation he felt with a master mind. He realized the uselessness of heeding or retaliating for the insults heaped upon him by his half-intoxicated host. He had come to fulfill a mission, and he comprehended that Durand's condition was favorable to the hoped-for outcome of the interview he projected.

Durand led the way to the room where Le Britta had first seen dead Gideon Vernon. He threw himself into an arm-chair, and frowned at his visitor.

"Go ahead!" he ordered.

"I have come to see you," announced Le Britta — "to warn you."

"To what?" scowled Durand.

"To warn you," repeated Le Britta, solemnly.

"Of what?"

"Of your peril, of the future. Ralph Durand, I shall waste no words upon you. I know that you substituted an evaporating acid for ink, and reduced Gideon Vernon's last lawful will and testament to worthlessness."

The hardened knave in the luxurious arm-chair had the audacity to chuckle at this bold statement.

"Good!" he jeered, disdainfully. "Go on."

"You murdered Gideon Vernon"——

Durand started violently.

"You know what has become of Sidney Vance. You are plotting to wreck this estate for your own personal benefit during the term of your guardianship."

"Anything else?" queried Durand, placidly.

"Is that not enough? Are you human, to sit there, heartless, sneering, merciless, while the rightful owner of this home is a wanderer and an outcast!" cried Le Britta, indignantly.

"Do you want my answer in plain words?" ground out Durand.

"Yes, if you are capable of telling the truth."

"I have the power to order you to be ejected from this house like the insolent meddler and intruder you are," spoke Durand, angrily, "but I am getting used to what people say about me. All I have to say is comprised in two little words."

"And they are?"

"Prove it!"

Aye, prove it! Jera Le Britta recognized the strong citadel of non-committal and defiance behind which this heartless knave had entrenched himself. He did not show his chagrin, however. He arose from his chair, advanced to the table, leaned one hand impressively upon it, and fixing an unwavering glance straight upon the face of his sneering companion, he said, gravely and resolutely:

"I will!"

Ralph Durand stirred uneasily. His glance shifted. He knew that he had a determined man to deal with.

"Section by section, fact by fact, I will!" continued Le Britta, energetically. "I tell

you, Ralph Durand, that, ere a month is passed, sure as the sun shines, I will know the truth of all your plottings."

"Then why do you come here!" snorted Durand, incredulously.

"To prove my words. First and foremost, there is the will. Your scheming destroyed it — your deft knowledge of subtle chemicals enabled you to retain your power as guardian of Gladys Vernon."

"Under a valid, existing will, yes," replied Durand.

"Which the new will recalled and vitiated. That will is destroyed, but"——

Le Britta paused. He wished his antagonist to feel the full power of his disclosures. The latter could not conceal his interest and suspense. His lips twitched nervously, and the vivid emotion he experienced began to undermine the false strength given him by the liquor of which he had partaken.

"That will exists," concluded Jera Le Britta. "I can swear, Gladys Vernon, the witness, the old housekeeper, can swear that such a will was made. A court of justice would believe us. What, then, would you



P. 67.—Durand dragged Vernon from his chair.

say, if I told you that, despite your machinations, that will still exists ? ”

“ I don’t believe it ! ” gasped the now thoroughly startled and affrighted Ralph Durand, his features turning ashen in their hue.

“ I speak the truth. Word for word I can read it to you. Line for line I can show it to you. ”

The plotter began to tremble. He had dabbled in chemicals successfully. Suppose this man, Le Britta, had exceeded his skill ?

A thousand possible complications ran riot in his brain. Had they restored the faded writing ? Had he blundered somewhere along the line ?

“ I don’t believe it ! ” he repeated, his voice a hoarse, faint monotone. “ You have a copy — the counterpart of the will itself ? Bah ! you seek to frighten me. You have it ? ”

“ Yes. ”

Pitiless, convincing as the stroke of doom the answer sounded.

“ You can show it to me ? ”

“ I can. ”

“ Where is it ? ”

With a mighty sweep of his hand, Jera

Le Britta brought it down across his breast-pocket, and uttered the single ominous word :
“ Here ! ”

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CHRONICLE OF THE CAMERA.

“ HERE ! ”

The word revealed volumes. A plain-spoken, straightforward man, in every-day life, Jera Le Britta could inject force, expression and emotion into a word, when his heart was in its utterance.

In the present instance, he realized that its effect might mean the salvation of fugitive Gladys Vernon ; he comprehended that once to unman the scheming knave before him, to throw him off his guard, to hold him even for one quivering moment of time at his mercy, meant confession, weakness, the possession of those vital facts only outlined now in his mind as vague conjectures.

Slowly Le Britta unbuttoned his dress coat. As his well-formed chest and sinewy hands exerted themselves, the craven Durand shrank back, physically as well as morally

cowed before the preponderating influence of his opponent's strength.

Jera Le Britta drew the packet containing the precious glass negative from his pocket.

Carefully he undid its coverings. Wrap by wrap it was unfolded, until, finally, reaching the last envelope and the straw-board sheets that enclosed it, he drew the little piece of glass into view.

"Here," he spoke, calmly, "is the evidence of your iniquity, the proof that Gideon Vernon made a will revoking the power reposed in you by a former one. Why do I show it to you? Shall I tell you?"

"Yes," gurgled in Durand's throat.

"Because I wish to avoid scandal, litigation. Because I wish to give you a final chance to atone for your past wrong-doing. When I have shown it to you, when I have plainly, irrefutably convinced you that it with my evidence will rescind your powers, and rescue this fair estate and its fairer rightful legatee from your machinations, you can resign your trust."

"And if I refuse?"

"The law will be appealed to."

"Show your boasted proofs!"

"I will. Behold!"

Advancing to within two feet of the gaping, trembling Durand, the photographer placed the glass negative so that the light could shine through it.

In brief, terse sentences he related how it had come into his possession. In calm, measured tones he followed the craven's eyes, and read the chronicle of the camera.

It was a strange repetition of the last will and testament of dead Gideon Vernon. The schemer stared, listened, trembled. He was a bold, defiant knave when he held the reins of power, but just now he seemed to realize the weakness of his position.

The effect of the revelation upon Durand was far more startling and satisfactory than Le Britta had hoped to accomplish. His experiment was a complete success.

Ashen-faced, baffled, criminal Ralph Durand became convulsed like a man in the incipient stages of paroxysm.

"Show it to me!" he hissed, hoarsely, flinging out his trembling hands. "Let me read, inspect for myself."

"No."

With one hand Le Britta forcibly pushed back the all too eager knave.

Not for a moment would he trust that precious article, the tell-tale negative, in his unscrupulous hands.

He placed the little piece of glass upon the table, slanting it against two books, so that, as a perpetual menace fully visible to Durand, it might continue to impress and influence him.

Then he strode between it and the baffled villain, who glared alternately at it and its owner.

‘Bah! a trick to frighten me,’ gurgled in Durand’s throat.

“You know better,” responded Le Britta, sternly. “Your face betrays you, your trembling frame reveals your terror, your conviction. That is proof one. It disposes of the will affair. I ask you, ere I proceed further, to here and now resign your trust as Gladys Vernon’s guardian.”

Durand did not reply. He felt that he could gain nothing by a confession or a compromise. This calm, resolute man meant what he said. Divest him of power of guardianship, what guarantee had Durand that

his next step would not be to land him in a felon's cell as the murderer of Gideon Vernon?

He calculated silently the chances of defeating Le Britta's designs. He realized the full value of that tell-tale negative. Proficient in all the quirks and turns of the law, he knew that the negative, together with Le Britta's verbal story of the making and disappearance of the new will, and his own unsavory reputation, would evoke the interest, suspicion and mediation of a court of justice, if nothing more, and cause a rigid surveillance of his actions as guardian.

In other words, the negative frightened him. It was a powerful weapon in the hands of a determined adversary, but the old crafty expression returned to those sinister eyes, as Durand recalled Le Britta's story of the accidental discovery of the picture in the camera.

"Well, what have you to say?" demanded the photographer.

Durand smiled—a ghastly, sickly smile. The corners of his mouth twitched nervously, his brow furrowed with disquietude and uncertainty.

"Say?" he gulped. "Why, you've played me a trump card."

"Ah! you confess that, do you?"

"Yes. I suppose old Vernon's lawyer just chuckled over your discovery."

This was a clever feeler—a hint to lead on his antagonist to reveal more that the schemer wished to know.

Blunt, straightforward, the honest and honorable Le Britta was no match for his adroit foe in the line of tactics the latter had resolved to adopt. Confident in his strength and the integrity of his position, he did not discern the trap into which Durand was leading him.

"The lawyer?" he repeated, vaguely.

"Yes."

"I have not shown it to the lawyer yet."

Ralph Durand's eyes glittered with a fierce, sinister triumph. That innocent admission raised his depressed hopes like magic.

"Nor the doctor, either, I suppose?" he ventured.

"Nor the doctor, either."

"Why," continued the crafty schemer, leading his opponent on deftly, "I should

have thought that the first thing to do after you discovered your vaunted clue to all my guilt and your own superb smartness" — here he sneered audibly, the more effectually to throw Le Britta off his guard and distract him from guessing his true intentions — "I should have thought that the first thing you did was to perfect your negative, print a score of copies, and send them to the judge, the lawyer, all your friends and my enemies!"

"No," spoke Le Britta, bluntly. "I hastened here at once to see if I could not reason you into the right thing. There is time abundant to attend to all that."

"Is there!"

Ralph Durand half arose in the arm-chair. His shrinking helplessness slowly became the crouching attitude of a tiger posing for a sudden spring.

"Yes, an abundance of time. But, we waste words" —

"And that picture, that half-developed negative, is all the chronicle you have of this alleged will?"

"Is it not enough?"

"It might get lost, disfigured, broken."

"I shall see to that."

"I have an offer to make you."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"What is it?" demanded Le Britta, suspiciously.

"I will buy it of you."

"You!"

"Yes. I offer you for that little piece of glass one thousand dollars cash. Come, be reasonable! You are concerning yourself in the welfare of people you scarcely know. Take the thousand dollars, deliver up the negative, and leave people to fight their own battles."

Jera Le Britta flushed scarlet.

"You insulting scoundrel," he cried, with flashing eyes, his fists slowly closing and unclosing. "You deserve an honest man's best efforts at thrashing you. Enough! I will dally no longer with you. I take my evidence of your guilt to the courts of justice."

"No, you never will!"

The declaration was a ringing hiss. Quick as a flash, Ralph Durand sprang forward. He had but one idea in his mind—to reach the precious negative, secure and destroy it.

Upon it hinged all his hopes of fortune; he knew it, he realized it fully.

His move, sudden as it was, however, was intercepted by the guarded Le Britta.

The photographer divined his purpose. He met the fierce onward rush of the scoundrel ere he was half-way to the table, he seized him by the shoulders.

Ralph Durand was a powerful man, an adroit man, too, in tricks likely to baffle and beat an unwary foe.

The man, however, who had never weakened a splendid constitution with over-indulgence in liquors and tobacco, was fully a match for a rum-wrecked, nicotine-poisoned adversary.

Seizing Durand by the shoulders, he fairly flung him straight back into the arm-chair he had just left, with a shock that made the craven's jaws come together like the springs of a steel trap.

There he sat, a picture of baffled villainy, a huddled-up mass of breathless, jarred humanity.

"You sit still, if you are wise!" warned the photographer, sternly. "Once more and for the last time, will you resign your trust

as guardian of Gladys Vernon, go your way until the law finds you out for some new villainy, or shall I take that negative to a court of law and force you to do so?"

"Give me time to think!" pleaded the breathless, baffled Durand.

He sat scowling, trembling with rage, his eyes glaring balefully at the man who had beaten him back at every point.

Watching him warily, Le Britta awaited his decision.

Suddenly Durand sprang to his feet, just near to hand was the fireplace, and lying across its fender was a short, heavy iron poker.

This he had seized, this he now waved above his head.

"Never!" he fairly yelled. "If I give in in one point, you will hound me down in a dozen. Never! never! never!"

He poised the iron missile. Le Britta supposed that he meditated a murderous assault upon himself, dodged, advanced, sought to get near enough to his nimble foe to disarm him.

The poker swayed aloft, cutting the air in

a swooping circle, until it wizzed like a minnie ball.

Then it left the hand of the rascal, but not to descend on the head of his unarmed foe.

No, with a groan of alarm and startled dismay, too late Jera Le Britta comprehended the full, sinister purpose of his foe.

The glass negative, not its possessor, was the source of all Ralph Durand's interest just then.

The whirling missile of iron swept clear past Le Britta's dodging head, it grazed the table, straight as an arrow struck the tilted fac-simile of Gideon Vernon's last will and testament.

Crash !

The next moment the precious glass negative was shattered into a thousand pieces !

CHAPTER XVII.

A NEW SURPRISE.

"You scoundrel !"

Fairly blinded with anger, the dismayed and routed Le Britta sprang forward to wreak summary vengeance on the sly, dissimulat-

ing rogue who had baffled his skill completely.

With a groan of anguish the photographer comprehended the terribly disastrous denouement of the scene that had begun with an augury of certain triumph.

Ralph Durand had sank back into the arm-chair, with the gloating, exultant face of a fiend rampant and satisfied.

"Ha! ha!" he chuckled, jeeringly, "who is master now, my smart picture peddler? Your work goes for nought!"

"Wretch!"

"Let me see. I offered you one thousand dollars for your picture. I would not give one thousand cents just now! Gather up the fragments, my over-sanguine meddler! They will sell for old glass."

Le Britta was too overcome to speak. The helplessness of his position, the wild victory of his opponent, the uselessness of further discussion all occurred to his mind, as a glance at the glass-littered carpet showed the wreck and ruin wrought by the well-directed iron missile in the brawny hand of Ralph Durand.

He glared once at the scoundrel, whom he

could have annihilated with a look. Then, turning, he slowly walked from the room and the house, uttering a single bitter, ominous, echoing word of warning —

“Wait!”

Ralph Durand laughed mockingly and gleefully. He rubbed his hardened palms together, he gloated over his enemy's downfall, he chuckled, he capered.

Long after Le Britta had got out of sight of the villa, he sang and danced, and poured down liberal potations of fiery brandy, little reckoning of a change destined to come over the spirit of his dreams ere many days of his worthless, scheming existence had passed away.

As to Le Britta, that tramp back to the village was the bitterest walk of his life. He blamed himself for all that had occurred. He reproached and deprecated now the blind over-confidence that, tempting him single-handed to oppose a crafty foe, had led him into the greatest error of his life.

But all that was past now, and, added to pity for wandering Gladys and his keen sense of justice, was a smarting sense of defeat that spurred him on to take up anew the cudgel

against Ralph Durand, as a personal foe against whom he bore an especial personal grievance.

What should he do, what could he do? The old will, giving Durand full control of the Vernon fortune, and therefore an undisputed censorship over Gladys Vernon herself, could never be annulled now. The unscrupulous swindler was free, by clear sanction of the law, and Gideon Vernon's expression of utter confidence in his power to wreck this royal estate, render its rightful legatee an outcast, and defy her helpless friends.

Oh! it was bitter, torturing, cruel, to realize; and, worst of all, the object of his persecutions, Gladys, was a wanderer, a fugitive. Her lover, Sydney Vance, had disappeared, and the threads of their lives commingled in a tangled skein, the solution to which the crafty Durand alone possessed.

There was an element of the indomitable and stubborn in Jera Le Britta's nature. It had marked important and vital issues in his life in the past. Just now, it spurred him on to action. His duty was to return home. He had done all he could to right a great wrong, and had failed, but he could not

confess himself beaten, he could not endure the thought that he had undertaken a great task and had failed in its accomplishment, and must, perforce, shrink from the field with drooping colors.

"I *will* learn the truth. I *will* evolve consistency from this tangled complication!" he uttered, forcibly, and, just arrived at that conclusion, he came face to face at the edge of the town with the village lawyer.

Mr. Munson greeted him cordially, more than that, effusively. His thoughtful eyes glowed with excitement as he intuitively traced in Le Britta's presence there a subtle connection with the Vernon interests."

"What news?" he queried, expectantly.

"None of any great cheer or encouragement," replied the photographer, in a depressed tone. "And you?"

"The doctor and myself have sent a detective to trace and bring back poor Gladys."

"Has he found her?"

"Not yet. Another officer is looking out for her lover, Sydney Vance. Rome was not built in a day. It takes time to follow an obscure trail. We shall have some word shortly."

"I hope so," murmured Le Britta. "I have something to tell you."

"Yes?"

"But not of a very inspiring nature."

"Your face tells me that."

Le Britta related his story of the discovery and fate of the glass negative.

The lawyer looked startled at the thrilling recital.

"Too bad!" he commented when the photographer had completed his graphic narrative; "too bad, indeed!"

"The negative was an important clue?"

"Decisive, I should say; but we won't cry over spilled milk. That scoundrel of a Durand is a desperate man, but we shall catch him napping yet."

"I doubt it."

"The sleekest rogues forget to bar their doors, sometimes."

"He is always on his guard."

"You talk hopelessly."

"Of finding out something by remaining quiescent? — Yes. I believe in personal effort, Mr. Munson; I do not pretend to any particular detective ability, but I am going to try to see what I can do by watching this

knave. For all we know, he has tracked Gladys. He may have her a captive somewhere, he may connive at her death. He may have some scheme to later come in and inherit or claim the property personally. The stake he plays for is a large one, and he will win, if left undisturbed."

The lawyer looked impressed and serious.

"You are talking sense, Mr. Le Britta," he remarked, gravely.

"Of course," pursued the photographer, "I am a comparative stranger to Miss Vernon, but I have a heart, sympathies, that impell me to do my duty. I must, I shall, find this poor girl. I cannot rest until I know her fate. I shall make all my arrangements to devote a week, or months if need be, in her behalf."

"In other words, you will personally take up the trail?"

"Yes."

The lawyer's eyes sparkled with genuine admiration, and he grasped Le Britta's hand warmly.

"You are a noble man, Mr. Le Britta!" he murmured, with strong emotion. "I can rely on you. Command my co-operation

and my bank-account. I feel now that we will succeed."

Once started on a case, Jera Le Britta was a hard man to dissuade from his purpose. He remained at the village that day and the next, "looking over the ground," as he called it.

What he learned he did not impart to either the lawyer or the doctor, for it consisted of trivial suspicions and suggestions.

"To-morrow," he said to the lawyer that night, "I shall obtain a suitable disguise ; to-morrow I shall take up the trail at Hawthorne villa. First, I shall strive to locate the missing Sydney Vance."

"And not Gladys?" ejaculated the lawyer, surprised.

"No ; for she, I am sanguine, is resolute in hiding from friend and foe alike. Vance, on the contrary, I feel sure, is a prisoner in the power of Ralph Durand, or has been murdered by him. Fasten such a crime on Durand, or find Vance and get his story of the death of Gideon Vernon, and we have a tangible basis to proceed upon. Then, Durand once deposed, do not fear but that Gladys will return. She will be watching

the outcome of events at Hawthorne villa from a distance, rest assured of that."

"The best-laid plans of men and mice gang oft agley!" however, as Jera Le Britta realized that evening.

For, on the eve of devoting all his energies toward probing the great Vernon mystery personally, that very evening the clerk at the hotel handed him a sealed envelope.

It was a telegraphic dispatch, and was dated that afternoon from his home.

"Return at once," read the mystifying message. "Vernon case. Important."

And it was signed, stranger still, by his old-time friend, Dr. Richard Milton.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"FINDERS KEEPERS."

JERA LE BRITTA was surprised, more than that, absolutely startled, as he perused the innocent-looking message that bore so strange and unexpected a revelation.

Its mandate, advising urgency, was peremptory, its wording mysterious. At first,

he feared that it might indicate trouble in his business. A year previous, a fire had caused havoc and disruption of business temporarily in his studio, and he had experienced anxiety ever since on the same score. Illness in his family, too, might be imminent. But, no! neither business nor domestic complication had incited the telegram, the photographer felt sure of that after a second perusal, for the mystic interpolation, "Vernon case," betrayed the real, actuating influence behind the action of his friend Doctor Milton.

"What can it mean? Vernon case!" cogitated the startled Le Britta. "Doctor Dick is no sensationalist, no alarmist. He's too cool and methodical for that. He knows all about the Vernons, for I told him. Can it be possible that he has made some important discovery — some new evidence in the camera? Pshaw! that is impossible. Has he found a trace of Gladys accidentally? Scarcely; what then? The only way to find out is to return home. Yes, I must leave affairs in abeyance here for a few days. I must learn what Dick has discovered."

Le Britta took the first train homeward-bound. Late as the hour was when he

reached his destination, he went straight to the office of his friend. A light showed at its outside window.

Tap ! tap !

"Come in."

"Jera !"

"Dick !"

"You got my message ?"

"I would not be here if I hadn't, for I was deep in mystery and work. What is it," queried the photographer, eagerly.

"What I telegraphed you, the Vernon case."

"Why ! Dick"——

"You wonder how I come to discover anything about it, way off here, away from its center of operations."

"It puzzles me, I must confess."

"Still, I have."

"Ah ! a trace of the girl ?"

"Primarily, yes."

"You mean that you have found out where she is hiding ?"

"Not at all."

"Then"——

"Yesterday," and Doctor Milton drew a newspaper from a table near by, "I chanced

to look over a journal published in a city not a hundred miles from here."

"Go on."

"Glancing over its columns, I came upon a queer-reading advertisement."

"What was it?"

"Read for yourself."

Doctor Milton folded down the paper, and, his finger marking a column headed "Personal," indicated one of the advertisements under that heading.

Eagerly Le Britta perused the little item. It read:

"G. V.: Communicate with me at H. V. immediately. I and I alone have news of S. V. Would you save him? Then do not delay. R. D."

Le Britta looked up with an excited face.

"You understand?" queried the doctor, in an impressive tone.

"Yes; a message from Ralph Durand to Gladys Vernon, telling her to write to Hawthorne villa if she would save her missing lover, Sydney Vance."

"Exactly. It struck me the minute I saw the initials, for I remembered all you had told me about this strangely mysterious case."

"It proves what I have surmised all along."

"And that is?"

"That Ralph Durand was instrumental in the disappearance of Sydney Vance, and now knows where is."

"It looks that way."

"Durand knows that through Vance only can he influence Gladys to return to the villa."

"But why should he wish it?"

"That his future plottings will show. And this was why you telegraphed me?"

"Not at all."

"Eh!" ejaculated Le Britta, vaguely.

"There is something else?"

"Yes."

"What? Hello! What's that, Dick? A visitor—some one overhearing our conversation!"

Le Britta had started quite violently, for just then from the next apartment echoed a faint sound like the moan or sigh of a human voice.

"No listener, no fear of that, Jera, but some one is there."

"Who?"

"The man whose strange discovery caused me to send that telegram."

“Ah!” exclaimed Le Britta, excitedly.
“You put me on nettles, Dick!”

“When I mentioned the Vernon case in my telegram,” pursued the doctor, “I referred to him. Listen.”

Briefly, Doctor Milton told the story of the injured tramp. He explained how he had come to take him from pity under his own roof, and dwelt particularly on the sufferer’s ravings about being rich, about his secrets, and about Hawthorne villa.

“It startled me, Jera,” explained the doctor, “to hear a tramp, a stranger, mention names fresh in my memory from your lips in connection with the Vernon case that very same day. It puzzled and interested me. I watched, I studied the man. For days I have been working over him. This morning I attempted a great experiment to save his arm. To-night, the symptoms of brain suffering were so definite, that I fear he is beyond surgical aid, and I sent for you.”

“Then you have made some new discovery about him?”

“Yes ; early this afternoon he had quite a lucid spell. He made me tell him all about his injuries. When I had done so he

moaned despairingly, and told me that while he knew my experiment might have saved him from becoming a cripple had he lived, he felt that he was doomed."

"And you think so."

"I fear it. The injury to the brain is permanent. Then I began to question him about his singular reference to Hawthorne villa."

"And what did he say?"

"At first he fought shy of making any revelation. He kept muttering that 'finders were keepers,' and that he was 'rich, rich, rich.' Then, some sudden twinge of pain caused him to think of his dreaded death. He grew affrighted, then grateful for the great kindness of an utter stranger, as he chose to consider my slight services, and then he burst into tears, and said that he would tell me all his story."

"Dick, you interest me deeply!" exclaimed the absorbed Le Britta, startled and hopeful at the same time.

"He was a tramp, he said," continued Doctor Milton, "and a tramp with rather a low estimate of honesty. A certain night, and, Jera, he named the very night that

Gideon Vernon was murdered at Hawthorne villa, he was in its vicinity. He said it was about dusk, and, as he was just going around to the back door of the mansion to beg a mouthful of food, he saw a man, an old man, Gideon Vernon himself, he afterward ascertained to a certainty, climb from the window of his sick-room out into the garden."

"Oh! that is impossible," ejaculated the incredulous Le Britta.

It seemed so to him, for the photographer had not been aware of the tragic incident of the last hour of Gideon Vernon's life — of his dread and discovery of the lurking Durand, of the strong stimulant he had taken, of how he had sought to remove the iron box from the cabinet, so that the lurker by no chance might secure and despoil it.

"The tramp is positive," continued the doctor. "He says his curiosity was evoked, and he hid and then followed Mr. Vernon. His cupidity was aroused as he saw him open the cover of the box, and a royal store of jewels and bank-notes showed. Mr. Vernon hurried through the garden, reach the ravine behind it, and suddenly disappeared behind a rock. By some secret ledge unknown to

the tramp, he reached a spot down the cliff-side. The tramp marked the place — the rock, the shelf of stone. Mr. Vernon returned empty-handed. He could scarcely stagger back to the house for weakness. Evidently fearing Durand, he had hidden, his available treasure. The tramp still followed him. He saw him return to the house. The next morning he came to locate the ravine, intent upon finding the treasure. Then he heard of Mr. Vernon's murder. It frightened him. Here he was, a suspicious character, hanging around the villa. They might suspect him."

"What did he do?"

"Fled from the place; first, however, carefully noting the spot in the vicinity of which the little iron box had surely been secreted. Mr. Vernon had died with the secret of its hiding-place locked in his breast. The tramp felt that he had a right to it. He decided to remain away until the 'murder-scare,' as he termed it, was over. Then he would return, secure it, and enjoy a fortune which, to his loose code of morals, came under the heading, 'finders keepers.'"

Jera Le Britta was deeply startled at this

graphic narrative. He realized how reasonable it all was. But what did the box contain? Was it really valuable?

"The tramp," began Doctor Milton again, "then told me that this box he could direct me to. He bequeathed it to me, if he died. I smiled at the idea of consenting to receive other people's money, but I knew how glad you would be to secure even this faint clue to a new complication in a case that so interested you. About to tell me something more, the tramp fell back, insensible, again. He cannot stand many more of these fainting shocks. I thought it best to send for you, and telegraphed you."

"And the man?"

"Has lain in a state of coma ever since."

"With his secret half told?"

"As you know."

"Doctor," spoke Le Britta, energetically, "you must revive him!"

"It may be impossible."

"Temporarily?"

"I can try it."

"He must tell us definitely where that box is hidden!"

Doctor Milton took up a medicine case,

extracted a small, delicate, hypodermic syringe, and filled it with some colorless liquid from a phial.

"Come," he said, "I will try to revive the man. I will try to secure the secret of the hiding-place of Gideon Vernon's box of valuables."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TRAMP'S SECRET.

NOISELESSLY Dr. Richard Milton and his companion entered the sick-room.

Jera Le Britta stood curiously viewing the outlined form upon the couch. As the doctor carefully turned up the lamp, its rays plainly illumined the object that centered the attention of the photographer.

The face of the tramp-patient was white and bloodless, his unkempt shock of hair and straggling beard looked not at all confidence-inspiring, but from a survey of his features to his injured arm, Le Britta gazed with wildly-distended eyes.

That arm was strapped at wrist and shoulder across an iron frame. It was bare save for a piece of almost invisible gauze,

saturated with some oily wash, and it looked like a mottled checker-board in its strange, puzzling appearance.

“Why! Dick!” murmured Le Britta, “that arm”——

“Was the injured member. It was in a shape that no ordinary surgical care could adjust. It was either amputation or a crippled member for life, so I set myself to work to experiment.”

“You mean?”

“Skin-grafting.”

Le Britta started intelligently.

“Yes,” continued Doctor Milton, his face kindling with professional pride and confidence, “I wanted to save the poor fellow months of suffering. Yesterday I gave out through the town what I intended to do. Humanity and curiosity alike brought me all the people I needed. From each I took an inch of cuticle, and transplanted it in patches on my patient’s arm. You see how it is covered? I have given him what nature cannot supply in this instance, a new cuticle, consisting of one hundred and forty-two adhesive plasters of other people’s skin—farmers’ cuticle, ministers’ cuticle, girls’ cuticle, boys’

cuticle ; a mixture, but all necessary. If the man recovers, he will owe his perfect arm to the kindness of a large number of fellow-beings. If there is a moral as well as a physical transplanting, may be he will assimilate some better qualities in that sadly-neglected nature of his."

Jera Le Britta did not reply to his friend's half-jocular exordium. He admitted and appreciated his genius, and marveled at the deftness that admitted of his scientifically supplying a man denuded of vital accessories to perfect cuticle-exudation, with a practically new set of pores to his skin.

He watched silently as the doctor bared the other arm of the patient, applied the point of the tiny glass instrument in his hand, and hypodermically injected a powerful stimulant into the laggard veins.

The sufferer on the couch winced, shrank and moaned. Watched breathlessly by doctor and photographer, his lips began to twitch, his eyelids quivered.

There was a noticeable dilation of the nostrils, his pulse quickened, his respirations grew faster, he sighed, opened his eyes, fixed them on vacancy, then on the doctor, and

then, an expression of mingled horror and concern on his homely features, he gasped out —

“I’ve got to die !”

“Calmly, my friend, calmly !” urged the doctor in gentle tones. “You are doing remarkably well.”

“Yes, but this weight on my head — this horrible throbbing ! No ! no ! I am doomed. Doctor, I didn’t tell you” —

“Do not concern yourself about anything. Think placidly, talk slowly.”

“Yes, but maybe I have only a few minutes to live !” shuddered the tramp. “No, yours was the first kind hand lifted to aid me in the long years, the first unselfish act from the heart. You shall be rich — rich ! In the sole of my left shoe — the paper that tells — the secret — the hiding place” —

Fainter and fainter sounded the gasping voice. The man’s eyes closed spasmodically, his breath came short and labored.

“Wait !” murmured Doctor Milton, mandatorily, as Le Britta moved to leave the room.

“Ah ! I forgot.” Again the sufferer started up, this time a piteous, haunted expression

on his face. "Doctor! they can't drag me into the net for murder if I didn't do it, can they?"

"Certainly not, my poor fellow."

"And if I tell you, to unburden my coward conscience, and I should happen to live, they can't say it was a lie, and, as I was there, I must have done the murder myself, the murder of that old man, Gideon Vernon?"

"Mercy! what is all this?" gasped the startled Le Britta.

"No! no!" urged the doctor, soothingly, "tell me what it is. You saw him killed?"

"Yes. I was at the veranda, watching. A man stole in at the window, I saw him. Another young man came in to find the old man dying a minute later, but he did not do the deed. He ran after the real murderer, the man dressed as a tramp."

"Ah! Ralph Durand!" ejaculated Le Britta. "Do you hear, Dick? This man's evidence would hang Ralph Durand!"

"Hang? no, they sha'n't hang me! Who are you?" shrieked the tramp, for the first time noticing Le Britta. "Save me, doctor! save me, save" —

He sank back. Rigid, lifeless, he lay upon the couch.

"Is he dying, Dick?" breathed Le Britta, anxiously.

"No, but I fear" — began Doctor Milton, gravely.

"What?"

"These fainting shocks weaken him. Ah! I feared it! the fever again."

"If he could only be revived to recognize Ralph Durand?"

"Impossible. I will not have him disturbed again. His life, his reason quiver in the balance even now. I do not know if I can save him, but I will try."

"Try, try, indeed!" urged the photographer, earnestly. "For his own sake, for Gladys Vernon's sake, for he, he alone knows the hand that struck down Gideon Vernon!"

The doctor watched his patient for some moments. Then he went out into the next apartment, whither Le Britta had preceded him.

In his hand he bore one of the shoes which belonged to the tramp.

"Oh! the paper he talked about, the secret document that tells where the box of

treasure is hidden!" exclaimed Le Britta, interested. "I had almost forgotten about that, amid the startling importance of his reference to the murder."

Silently Dr. Richard Milton drew out some wooden pegs from the worn sole of the tramp's shoe.

"Here it is," he announced, taking out a flat, folded envelope.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MISSING LINK.

"WHAT is it?" queried Le Britta, pressing eagerly forward to the side of his companion.

"So far, only a dirty, wrinkled heavy manilla envelope.

"But it has some kind of an inclosure."

"I shall soon learn."

Le Britta was beginning to get excited.

That day had held so many startling episodes in store for him, that he felt neither hunger nor fatigue. He could not but recognize the strange fatuity of circumstance. Here he had been delving at Hawthorne villa for facts, and his friend, miles distant, had dis-

covered clues that seemingly encompassed the most vital issues of the case in hand.

If the outcome of these revelations were ample, and as expected, the fortunes of Gladys Vernon would soon be bettered and brightened.

Arranging them in order, Jera Le Britta realized that he had three distinct points of vantage on which to base new operations.

First, the advertisement for Gladys Vernon, showing conclusively that Ralph Durand knew positively of the whereabouts of her accused lover, Sydney Vance.

Second, the evidence of the dying tramp, proving indubitably the guilt of Ralph Durand as the assassin of Gideon Vernon.

Third, the possession of the document or documents secreted in the sole of the tramp's shoe, referring, without question, to a certain iron box, containing, possibly, the bulk of dead Gideon Vernon's ready-cash fortune.

Documents these were, or, rather, slips of paper, three in number. From the envelope, creased and crushed from heavy foot-pressure, the doctor now drew three half-sheets of writing-paper.

The first was a rude scrawl, evidently indited at the tramp's instigation.

Deciphered, it read—

“I, Dave Wharton, have made a big discovery—a box of gold and jewels. Finders keepers, as the owner is dead. I get a man to write this at Dalton, because I might forget.”

Dalton was the first town west of Hawthorne villa. Here the tramp, in his flight from the scene of the murder, had evidently induced some stranger to scrawl the message.

The second piece of paper was in a totally different handwriting. It ran:

“Go to the villa. I know where. Then down the road to where a path strikes the ravine. This is written at Springford. I don't let anybody know the whole affair except myself, so I get my secret written in sections.”

“Do you see!” exclaimed Doctor Milton, looking up. “He was quite clever. Fearing he might forget the description of the place where he saw the iron box hidden, he had different people write according to his dictation. The last piece of paper, written

at the next town on his tramp, will probably complete the description of the hiding-place of the treasure. Yes, here it is."

The third strip of paper began:

"You go down the ravine north, until you come to a large"—

There the chronicle stopped, abruptly, definitely.

"Go on!" urged the interested Le Britta.

"There is no more to go on with," replied Doctor Milton.

"Why not?"

"The rest of the writing is obliterated."

"What?"

"Yes, see?"

"Too bad!"

Le Britta observed that the pencil marks, in the remainder of the sheet, had become a blur of vagueness. The tramp had trusted his precious secret to rather an unsafe place of hiding. Dampness had penetrated the thin sole of his shoe, it had, too, reached the inclosure in the envelope.

"I declare, this is provoking," commented Le Britta.

"Well, don't fret about it," enjoined the doctor, philosophically. "It may not be so

difficult to find by inquiry who wrote the last scrawl for the tramp; besides, you have a pretty fair idea that somewhere in the ravine near Hawthorne villa that treasure-box is hidden."

"You have no idea of the curves and windings of that same ravine," replied Le Britta, "or you would think as soon of hunting for a needle in a hay-stack as for a little iron box among the innumerable boulders and fissures of the ravine in question."

"Then let us assume that this last disfigured scrawl the tramp had written at the third town west of Hawthorne villa."

"Well, suppose that?"

"When you have time, go there. Crossville is a small settlement. You can easily get a trace of the tramp's visit, locate the man who wrote the note for him, and get him to repeat its contents."

"If he remembers the same."

"He probably will. See here, Le Britta! I imagine we've had enough excitement for one night. It is getting very late. We both need sleep. My whole efforts shall be directed to making my patient recover, so that his evidence may convict Ralph Durand of

the murder of Gideon Vernon. Your impetuous nature will probably not allow you to rest until you have found this mysterious hidden box. You can't do anything more to-night. Go home, and we will have another talk over the affair in the morning."

"Good advice, Dick! I'm off. You've made a great discovery, old friend, and I begin to see the light at the end of all this plot and mystery at last, thanks to you!"

"Thanks to the tramp, you mean, Jera."

"As you like, only the facts are there all the same."

Le Britta started from the doctor's rooms. He peered sharply down the unlighted corridor, as he fancied he heard a rustling sound at its farther end. Then bidding Doctor Milton good-night, he started for the street.

"I declare! some one *was* lurking in the hall!" he ejaculated, as he saw a stealthy form steal from the lower doorway, and disappear in the darkness and gloom of the night.

He ascribed his fears to fancy, the identity of the lurker, if there really had been such, to some homeless tramp, as he proceeded homeward.

He never imagined that Ralph Durand, as shrewd as his antagonists, might have set a spy to watch his movements.

If such was, indeed, the case, and that spy had overheard all the conversation in the doctor's office, he must know of the witness to the crime, and the precious treasure-box hidden in the winding ravine of Hawthorne villa !

CHAPTER XXI.

ART PHOTOGRAPHIC.

MORNING brought more mature reflection to Jera Le Britta. A placid sleep, an hour spent with the children at the late breakfast table, cheered and revived his fagged faculties like a cordial.

He had an abundance to think over, and, in the light of recent revelations, he saw less occasion for a speedy return to Hawthorne villa than the day previous.

Then, with no clues in sight, only a seeming muddle, he was driven to the desperate expedient of single-handed seeking to learn the hiding place of Gladys Vernon, the

whereabouts of her missing lover, Sydney Vance.

Now, all his thoughts were centered upon Ralph Durand. He was master of the situation at present. Depose him, and subordinate details would harmoniously adjust themselves.

The evidence of the tramp, Dave Wharton, would convict Ralph Durand. That meant the establishing of the complete innocence of Sydney Vance, and that, in turn, would enable Gladys Vernon to return home, without the dread of having a sinister foe as a guardian, or condemning her lover by her evidence.

But Dave Wharton might die? Even if he lived, weeks might elapse ere he could appear in a court of justice, and meantime, Gladys Vernon might be decoyed to the villa by the threatening Ralph Durand, and, put out of the way, her lover might be doomed. No! Le Britta could not bear the thought of lying inactive. He must be at work in the interests of imperiled innocence, and he resolved first and foremost to try and secure a reproduction of the missing directions as to the hidden treasure-box, and then to covertly and

in disguise watch Hawthorne villa, in the hopes that Gladys might return thither; to warn and rescue her, to learn, if possible, where Ralph Durand had Sydney Vance imprisoned, or held under his baleful spell of terror.

But fate ordained a far different programme for that day. Arrived at his studio, Le Britta was startled with the quick query from his fair assistant:

"Mr. Le Britta, have you seen them?"

"Them who?" queried the photographer, wonderingly.

"Four men looking for you, and bound to find you, they said."

"Why! who are they" — began Le Britta, vaguely.

"They said they were *officers*," demurely announced Miss Maud.

"Officers!" gasped Le Britta, "looking for me."

"Yes," replied Maud, a roguish twinkle in her eye — "officers of the Knights of Pythias."

"Oh!"

Le Britta's mouth expanded in an intelligent smile. He comprehended now. At a

point not many miles distant a conclave for the State was to begin that day. He had received an invitation. More than that, friends, brothers of the order, had insisted that he be present, not only to help enjoy the ceremonies and festivities of the occasion, but also to take photographic groups.

He had decided not to go three days previous. Business itself prevented. More than that, his interest in the Vernon case took all his thoughts from participating in any event of gayety.

"They are looking for you — went up to the house," explained Maud. "There they are!"

Four jolly, noisy friends burst into the studio as the fair artiste spoke.

"Le Britta! we've caught you."

"Sir Knight! you can't escape us."

Hearty greetings followed.

"Get ready. We're off on the next train. Stopped over for you," spoke one of the quartette.

"Boys, I can't go," dissented Le Britta, seriously.

"Nonsense!"

"You see, business" —

"It's business we want you to go for. We want some pictures taken."

"There's a first-class photographer on hand."

"He don't know how to pose us as you do. No use, Le Britta! No camera in the State can do such irresponsible fellows as us justice except yours."

It was useless resisting. He had been the soul and life of too many such gatherings to be excused. Reluctantly he assented, made hasty preparations for a brief stay in the neighboring city, and had a short consultation with his friend Doctor Milton.

"I can go on from there to Crossville and look up the missing document, Dick," he suggested.

"Just the thing, Jera!"

They reached their destination before noon. The city was given over to the genial knights, and their majestic uniforms glowed on every street.

Some twenty members of a certain lodge insisted on having their photographs taken in a group while they felt fresh and had the leisure, and arrangements were forthwith made.

Le Britta visited a photographer whom he knew, and whose studio was supplied with the very best instruments in use in the art.

The latter felt it an honor rather than an intrusion to have so famed a fellow-artist take his place at the camera, and the operating room was soon filled with the score of knights anxious to have a taking picture made in group.

Le Britta exerted himself to produce a striking effect. The light was fine, the camera, lenses and other accessories in harmony with the scenic accouterment of the studio.

Posing a subject was his peculiar forte, and he grouped his friends with great care. He tried to explain to one stubborn knight that he must present his left face to the camera.

"Why, the most striking curl of my mustache is on the right," demurred the gentleman in question, jokingly.

"Yes, and all your age and hardness of expression as well," retorted Le Britta. "Always remember this, boys, when you have your picture taken—present the left side of your face. From long observation I have learned that the right side of the face is the ugliest. It is the false side of a man's

character, it shows all the furrows and crow's-feet first; the right eye dims earliest; why, I can't tell, but it does, whereas, the left side of the face is softer, gentler, more natural and expressive. Now, then."

"Look pleasant!" laughed a jolly voice.

"Grin!" sang out another veteran.

"Not at all," demurred Le Britta. "Look natural; that is all. Remember, you have a mind, and that upon your features are indelibly stamped your characteristics. You are responsible for these; not the artist. If you want the picture to delineate what is best in you, think your highest, purest thoughts; let your thoughts dwell upon what is joyful, peaceful and sweet in life."

Le Britta was careful in posing his subjects; he was equally particular that the proper light should fall upon each face.

"Ready!"

There was a moment of silence, and the picture was taken. Le Britta did not say "Excellent." He knew the photograph would express that word, and the group repeat it when they came to inspect the same, later on.

Three other groups desired to come under his care that afternoon, but the photographer

had promised to do some work that required a personal use of the camera at once, and an arrangement was made for the next morning.

"If I can get away from these jolly fellows, I will run down to Crossville this afternoon," reflected Le Britta. "I can get back in time for the exercises this evening, for it is only a few miles distant."

Crossville was the town that, in the ordinary sequence of affairs, Dr. Richard Milton decided had been the place where the tramp had secured the last and subsequently obliterated strip of paper bearing on the secret of the hiding-place of Gideon Vernon's treasure-box.

At four o'clock that afternoon, the photographer managed to steal away from his friends, and an hour later he reached the little town of Crossville.

CHAPTER XXII.

CLUE ONE!

THE reader will remember, that of the three little strips of paper found in the shoe of the injured tramp at Dr. Richard Milton's

office, one had been disfigured and rendered undecipherable by dampness penetrating the sole and defacing it.

The tramp, when he left Hawthorne villa, had, with clever shrewdness, stopped at the first town, and had engaged some person to write the preamble, or first section of his secret.

At the next town, a second portion had been chronicled on a second strip of paper.

It was reasonable, therefore, for the doctor and Le Britta to theorize that at the next town on his vagrant route he completed the record.

The next town being Crossville, hither the photographer had come, hoping by inquiry and investigation to trace the person whom the tramp had employed to write the third section or the balance of the secret, without which only a blind search could result for the hidden box of treasure.

There were about fifty houses in Crossville, a hotel, a tavern, and the usual meager array of small shops and stores to be met with in every humdrum, way-back rural settlement.

Le Britta had a very fair description of the

tramp in his mind. To his care, also, Doctor Milton had intrusted the manilla envelope and the three bits of paper it contained. Armed with the blurred strip, presumably written at Crossville, Le Britta set out to locate its author.

He first visited the hotel, then in turn the stores, the shops, and several private houses.

Had the occupants seen, several days before, a trampish-looking man, dressed so and so?

No, none could recall the individual inquired about. There had been so many tramps around, they could not remember any particular one. They all looked alike, and talked alike, Le Britta's informants averred.

Had he, however, seen the village constable? He was the man to go to. Eagle-eyed, inquisitive, this official was supposed to welcome the advent of all strangers, and especially keep watch of those whose appearance was in the least degree suspicious.

Le Britta made several inquiries before he located the public functionary in question. He found the constable seated in the bar-

room of the tavern, smoking a corn-cob pipe and telling stories.

Le Britta could stand the pungent odor of chemicals, but liquor made him shudder with repugnance. He managed to lure the constable away from the distasteful proximity of the fiery compounds, that treat a man's stomach with about as much courtesy as an acid bath does an undeveloped plate, making finally the proboscis a true ruby-light, and the mental condition of the unfortunate, when his last dollar is gone, much to resemble a blue-print !

"I am looking for some trace of a tramp who passed through Crossville about a week ago," announced Le Britta, as a preface.

"A tramp ?" and the constable pricked up his ears, and looked wise and swelled out grandiloquently. "Ah ! a tramp ? Just so."

"Dressed" — and the photographer gave an accurate description of Dave Wharton.

"Seems to me I remember him."

"He wore an old, faded army cap."

"Ah ! I've got him !" ejaculated the officer.

"Sure ?"

"Yes. I ordered him to leave the place ; I even went with him to the limits."

"And he asked you to do a bit of writing for him?"

The constable started violently.

"Hello! how did you know that?" he ejaculated.

"Didn't you?" persisted Le Britta.

"I did, for a fact."

"Was that part of what you wrote?"

Le Britta exhibited the half-obliterated writing from the tramp's manilla envelope.

The constable examined it.

"Yes," he admitted, "that's it."

"You see it is almost erased?"

"Yes, I see it is."

"Can you remember what it was you wrote?"

The constable reflected deeply.

"I can't remember the exact words," he stated, finally.

"But the substance?"

"Yes, something about a big, flat rock."

"A big, flat rock."

"And then, a path leading down past some wild-grape vines."

"Proceed, please."

"And between two spurs of stone, a small spring. That's all."

“Sure?”

“Yes.”

Le Britta thanked the man. His information had been concise and satisfactory. He explained that the tramp had got hurt, and that he was looking up a memorandum he had made, of considerable importance to himself and others.

“Then he returned to the city, feeling that he had scored a material point in the case in hand. From the description given, he was sure that he could find the hidden treasure-box.

A pleasant time he passed with the knights that evening, and the next morning, with quite a party of them, he repaired to the photographer's, to take their pictures.

“I can only give you an hour,” explained the latter to Le Britta. “There is a dramatic company just leaving town, and they are coming to have some photographs taken,”

“An hour will be ample time,” responded Le Britta, and it was, for he got through with his friends, and left orders with the photographer as to the disposition of the pictures upon completion, just as several ladies entered the waiting-room.

Preparing the negatives consumed some little time, but at last Le Britta came out into the operating room.

"Well, good-by," he said. "Ah! excuse me, I thought you were alone."

The photographer was behind his camera, and seated near a screen was a veiled lady, evidently a member of the dramatic troupe he had referred to.

"Lift your veil, please," he said to the latter. "I am all ready."

The lady obeyed him.

"Mercy!" ejaculated the petrified Le Britta, starting back half-a-dozen feet in sheer surprise and bewilderment.

Staring blankly at the fair features revealed, he stood like one in a trance.

The lady at that moment happened to gaze at him.

With a violent start, she turned pale as death, and arose to her feet as she evidently recognized him.

Then, with a wild cry, she reeled where she stood, and fell senseless to the floor.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CHECKMATE.

THE new master of Hawthorne villa had got up late. Moreover, he had arisen with a headache, the result of too free indulgence in strong drink the previous night.

The mask of even ordinary civility was down now. Alone, unwatched, the lax muscles of his face, the ugly, malignant glare of his sinister eyes proclaimed Ralph Durand to be a very bad and a very dangerous man.

He kicked over a pretty ottoman, the handiwork of gentle Gladys Vernon; he smashed a daintily perfume case in his impatience at a wry collar, and then, half-dressed, hurried to the dining-room to brace his shattered nerves with frequent potations of his favorite liquor — rum.

“There! I feel like a man again,” he muttered, complacently, as the strong drink flushed his face and tingled in his blood. “I’m going it a little too strong, though. Durand, old boy! this won’t do! The master of a fortune and a rare old establishment, like Hawthorne villa, must go slow,

respectable-like. Just now, pure dash and defiance have made every one in sight take to flight or concealment, but they may mass their forces anew. Yes, I need to be wary, vigilant, indomitable. If I drink too much I may get careless, I may be taken unawares. I must have a cool head, iron nerves, a never-sleeping eye. No more drink in excess, old boy! until I perfect my plans."

Restored to good humor, Ralph Durand called the villainous-looking fellow he had appointed steward, gave his orders for the day, ate an ample breakfast, and, arraying himself in the loudest suit he possessed, started to walk toward the distant village.

"I'll wake them up—I'll bring that old foggy of a family lawyer to his senses!" he muttered. "No time like now. Gladys has been scared away—I know how to bring her back. She *must* come back! Her return is essential to my plots. First, there are certain little legal formalities that vest a thorough right in me for handling the estate that she must tacitly sanction; next, if I see the fortune slipping from my hands, I must proceed to extreme measures. She might make a will and die, leaving me sole heir. She

might marry — *me!* What an idea! but, as I hold her in mortal terror, why not? With the proofs to send her lover, Sydney Vance, to the gallows, with evidence that I control his liberty, she is a pliable tool in my subtle hands. Ah! I plot wisely, I execute well.”

The cold-blooded schemer chuckled serenely. He cut savagely at the pretty flowers by the roadside as he strolled along. He hated beauty — he despised nature. It had no charms for him. As he mutilated the glowing buds, so would he cruelly crush every foe to his interest who dared to cross his path.

“As to that meddling photographer, he won’t appear again in a hurry,” continued Durand. “I checked his mad career summarily. I obliterated the last tangible clue, in sight, to my rascality, as he terms it, my shrewdness, I say — the glass negative. Master of the situation complete, I propose to bring affairs to a climax, money matters to a basis. I intend to begin lining my nest from the proceeds of the estate, lest misadventure overcomes me, and turns me out of my position as censor of Gladys Vernon’s fate and the Vernon fortune.”

Durand proceeded straight to the office of the lawyer the minute he reached the village.

"Mr. Munson in?" he demanded, familiarly, of the boy in the outer office.

"Yes, sir."

"Busy?"

"Writing a letter, yes, sir. Does not wish to be disturbed."

"He'll see *me*!" interrupted Durand, insolently. "Tell him Mr. Durand is here."

"Mr. Durand? yes sir," replied the inexperienced youth, overawed by Mr. Ralph Durand's imperious manner, and the glitter of his great diamond pin.

"He'll see you, sir," he announced, reappearing in a few minutes.

"Thought he would! How are you, Munson?"

Durand flung himself into an easy-chair as he entered the private office.

The lawyer nodded curtly. His drawn brows told how he disliked his visitor.

"Not over glad to see me, are you?" laughed Durand, viciously. "Can't be helped, though. Come to see you on business."

"Ah! on business?" repeated the lawyer, his lips grim and set.

"Exactly."

"About"——

"The Vernon estate."

"Proceed."

"I am executor."

"You seem to be."

"Much against your liking! However, you won't dispute my claim. What I want to know is, how affairs stand. I am executor—I want something to execute!"

Ralph Durand chuckled diabolically at his horrible pleasantry. The lawyer looked disgusted.

"In other words," he said, "you wish to assume your trust?"

"At once."

"And take charge of the estate."

"The ticket, exactly!"

Mr. Munson took down a portfolio.

It was marked on the outside, "Estate of Gideon Vernon — Private."

He opened it, and drew forth some papers.

"Mr. Vernon's last memoranda of his possessions, real and personal," he announced.

“Very good, go on!” cried Durand, with sparkling, avaricious eyes.

“To summarize, there is the villa” ——

“Worth?” ——

“With furniture and belongings, say, twenty thousand dollars.”

“Quite a plum!”

“Next, the mines at Leeville” ——

“Valued?”

“At one hundred and twenty-five thousand. He was offered that once.”

“Better still! next!”

“Real estate in St. Louis, unimproved boulevard lots” ——

“Would bring?”

“At least fifty thousand dollars.”

“It’s piling up!” gloated the delighted plotter. “I want it all turned over to me. As trustee, I do as I please with it — invest it, speculate, bank or devote to improvements.”

“Unfortunately, under the very lax conditions of the will, you may.”

“Never mind that. Now then, old Vernon of course left lots of ready cash securities, bonds, jewels and the like?”

“He had such, yes, before he died. I see

on this memoranda, that the day before his death, he listed his personal belongings at a clear hundred thousand dollars."

Ralph Durand's eyes fairly blazed with covetousness. To handle all that in ready cash! His finger ends tingled.

"Now, then," he cried, excitedly, "when can you turn all this property over to me?"

"At any moment."

"Do it now!"

"On an order from the court."

Durand's face fell, but he said, a moment later:

"That's all right. I can get the order this morning — soon as court opens."

"Very well."

"You'll have the property in shape?"

"Yes, what there is of it?"

Ralph Durand started. There was a strange intonation in the lawyer's voice, a peculiar expression of latent triumph and vindictiveness in his face.

"What do you mean by that?" remarked Durand.

"I mean what I say."

"The deeds for the real estate are in your hands."

“ Yes.”

“ That settles that part of it, then. Now, then, as to the hundred thousand dollars in ready money — I get of that ” ——

“ *Not one cent !* ”

Mr. Munson uttered the words with a thrill of grim satisfaction.

“ What ! ” exclaimed Durand, starting suspiciously, alarmed at the lawyer’s triumphant, satisfied manner, “ you say ” ——

“ Not one cent, Mr. Ralph Durand ! I must acknowledge you as the executor of the estate of Gideon Vernon, but I fear you will not welcome the trust.”

“ Will not welcome it ? ” gasped the startled plotter, realizing some latent defeat, disaster, in the lawyer’s sphynx-like face.

“ No.”

“ And why not ? ”

“ Because,” replied the lawyer, impressively, “ the estate of Gideon Vernon is a complete wreck ! ”

CHAPTER XXIV.

A MYSTERY.

RALPH DURAND looked much like an eager fox-hunter suddenly checked in his mad career of further progress, by an insurmountable barrier, with a shock.

"The estate a wreck!" he gasped, falteringly.

His were the white face, the trembling lip, the dismayed eyes, now.

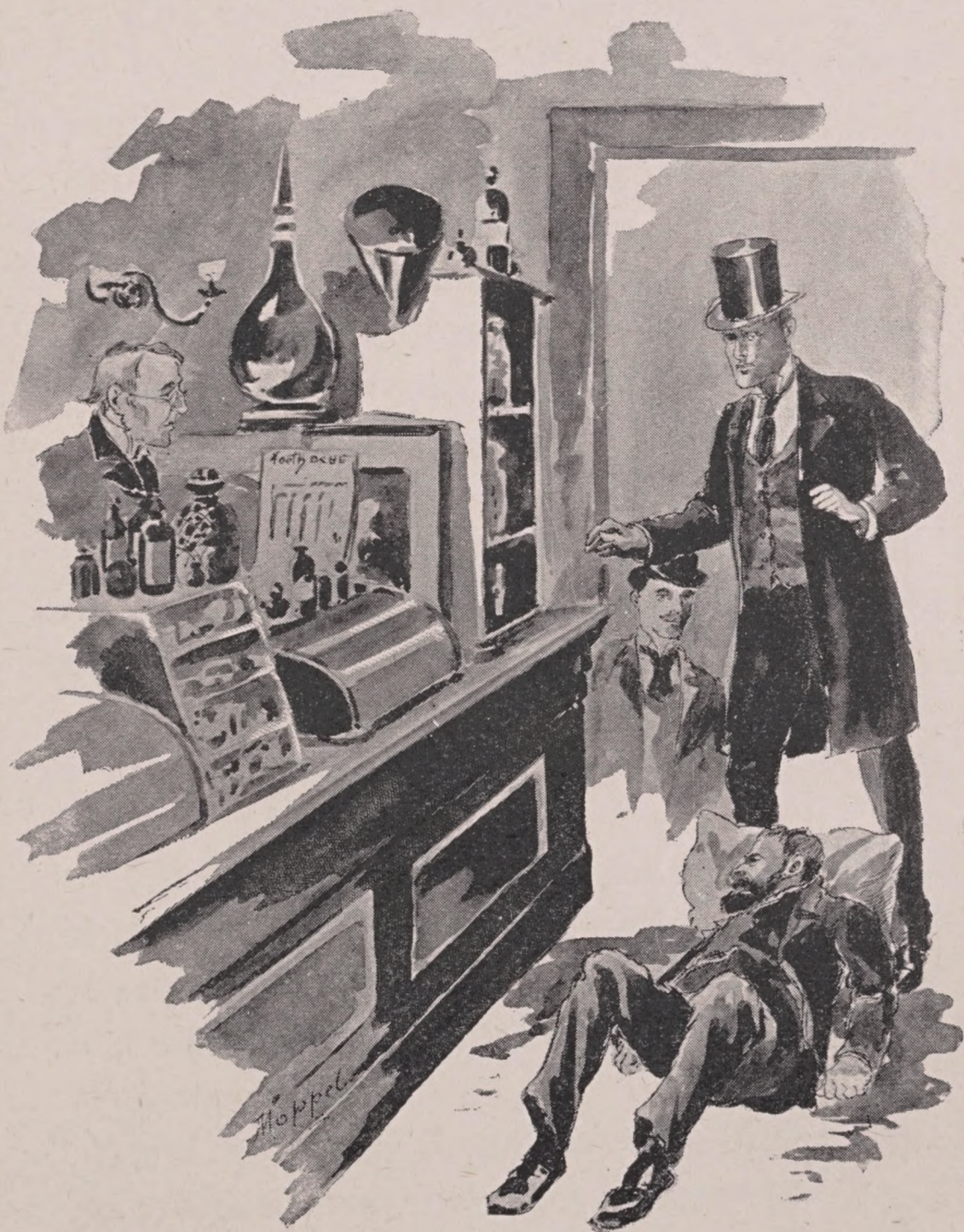
The lawyer locked his hands, placidly. However much he might deplore disaster to the Vernon interests, he seemed to fairly delight in the discomfiture and chagrin of his unwelcome client.

"Exactly," he murmured.

"I don't believe it!"

Durand flared out like a spitting volcano. He stormed, raved, threatened. The lawyer calmly awaited his quieting down.

"We return to facts," he spoke, with provoking coolness. "The estate is a wreck. Instead of your becoming the free and easy dispenser of thousands, you come into control of a shattered, almost worthless, estate."



P. 119.—Inside lay a man motionless, bleeding.

"I don't believe it!" choked out Durand, white with rage and disappointment.

"The records will bear me out."

"Trickery — fraud! A scheme to defeat me!"

"Take care," warned the lawyer, a dangerous look in his stern eyes, "how you accuse me. I know how to seek redress."

Durand cooled down, but his whole frame quivered with latent emotion.

"Go on!" he panted. "Explain your claims."

"Claims!" iterated Mr. Munson; "they are simple facts. The exact status of the case is I state."

"But old Vernon, a wealthy man, possessed of an enormous estate, as his memoranda shows!"

"I will explain. Mr. Vernon did own all the real estate listed, but I find that one week ago, unknown to me, he executed a mortgage on the entire property, the villa included."

"A mortgage?"

"Yes. It was made to a firm in the city."

"But the ready money you refer to?"

"That was it."

"*What* was it?" queried the puzzled Durand.

"The mortgage money. I have investigated. He positively made the mortgage. The records show it. He certainly received the money. The canceled check proves it. He converted it into cash. In other words, he loaded down the estate with a mortgage for fully half its value. Its income will not even pay the interest."

"Why?"

"Do you want a truthful reason?"

"Yes."

"To provide against the very contingency that has occurred—to so cripple the estate temporarily, that whoever became executor, would have to work for his salary, keeping the estate in order, instead of pilfering from it."

Durand bit his lips with suppressed rage at the lawyer's candor.

"But the money?"

"What money?"

"The mortgage proceeds."

"That," announced Mr. Munson, grimly, "has disappeared."

"Disappeared!"

"Exactly."

"You say he received it?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Did he not bank it?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"I have inquired?"

"Then he hid it."

"I do not know."

Ralph Durand sat a picture of consternation, suspicion and chagrin.

All his fond air-castles had been shattered at one fell, unexpected blow.

Instead of being able to handle a royal fortune at will, he would do well if he got the barest living out of his guardianship during its term of existence.

The hundred thousand dollars had disappeared. There was no doubt but that Gideon Vernon had received the amount. There was no doubt but that the lawyer spoke the truth when he said that he did not know what had become of it.

Durand left the office a depressed, enraged man — a baffled schemer.

In death, old Gideon Vernon's cleverness

had baffled him more than his defiance when alive.

What had Vernon done with the money? Ah! a thought came to Durand's mind with the intensity of a shock. Had Gladys received it?

He did not know, but he would know. That very day the newspapers that had published the initial advertisement that Dr. Richard Milton had shown to Jera Le Britta, received orders to continue it indefinitely.

And that evening, as Durand took a rusted key from his pocket and made his way down the river shore, bent evidently upon some mysterious mission, he muttered, hopefully:

"The advertisement will bring her back. She will come if she thinks her lover is in danger. Then for the truth. Gladys Vernon certainly knows what has become of that hundred thousand dollars, and I—I must find it—I must, I will possess it!"

CHAPTER XXV.

FOUND AND LOST.

JERA LE BRITTA had faced some startling surprises in his eventful career, but the scene that greeted his senses in the studio where he had been engaged in photographing his fellow-knights, fairly electrified him.

One glance at the lady in the chair, one penetrating, half-frightened look in return, and, as has been said, the woman sank fainting to the floor.

It was the photographer, and not Le Britta, who sprang to her rescue. The latter was too overcome to act for the moment. Overwhelmed, he stared fixedly at the white, beautiful face of the fair creature, who had gone down under some severe mental shock.

Then his surprised lips framed a single word—

“Gladys!”

Yes, it was she, Gladys Vernon, the heiress of Hawthorne villa, the refugee—victim of Ralph Durand’s cruel power; the heart-broken fiancée of Sydney Vance!

How had she come here? What fate had

sent her across the path of the man who had sought her so vainly, face to face, at a critical moment in the destiny of all concerned in the strange case, where villainy and avarice were waging a merciless battle against innocence and right?

Before Le Britta had fully regained his wits, the photographer had summoned a lady assistant. The insensible girl was removed to an inner apartment, the excited and breathless Le Britta sank to a chair.

He could only wait. The photographer, immersed in business, had ordered his assistant to do all in her power to resuscitate the insensible girl. From the waiting-room two other ladies had also gone to the aid of Gladys, and from excited, disjointed bits of conversation, Le Britta comprehended that Gladys Vernon was a new subordinate member of the dramatic company which was being photographed, and to which his friend had previously referred.

"I see it all," he murmured. "She fled from home—she sought to earn her own living. She hoped to put to account her rare elocutionary powers in the dramatic line, she hoped, doubtless, under a new guise, an

assumed name, to hide her identity ; ” and as Le Britta learned that the company was on its way to California, he discerned that Gladys’ determination to hide herself was a fixed one.

“ She ventured to remain somewhere near to Hawthorne villa disguised on the stage, veiled on the street. She probably reluctantly consented to have her picture taken, because she could not very well evade it. She saw me. The shock of recognition overcame her, and she fainted away. Thank heaven I have found her, though,” ruminated Le Britta. “ I will save her from a life of drudgery and loneliness, she shall come under my wife’s gentle ministrations until it is safe for her to reappear to her friends — she shall hear all I have to tell. I will win her to realize the folly of flight, I will protect, advise her as a friend, a brother.”

Half an hour went by. Le Britta began to grow impatient. The photographer was too occupied to talk with him. At last, Le Britta advanced to the door of the room into which Gladys Vernon had been carried.

He tapped lightly. No reply. He pressed the knob. The room beyond was untenanted.

Startled, he entered it. A door at its other end stood open. At its threshold the assistant confronted him.

"The girl—the young lady who was here?" spoke Le Britta, hurriedly.

"Which one?"

"The lady who fainted."

"She is gone."

"Gone!"

"Yes."

"When—where?"

"Fully twenty minutes since. She recovered, begged of her friends to get her away from here, and—they went.

"What way? To the street, while I sat dumbly waiting!" exclaimed Le Britta, concernedly. "She wishes to evade me; she is determined that she will not see her friends. Poor child! Amid her terror and uncertainty, she flies from those who have her interests at heart. But I must find her, and at once!"

"Easily said—difficult of execution! It took Jera Le Britta an hour to find out at which of the crowded hotels the dramatic company was stopping.

He learned that it had disbanded tempora-

rily, to reorganize in San Francisco in two weeks.

Departing in sections, by different routes, for different cities of visitation, ere the journey began, he was utterly at a loss to trace Gladys and her new-found friends. Special trains were being run for the day to the conclave, and the railroad officials were busy, confused and unsatisfactory in their answers to his anxious queries.

"It is useless to follow the many blind trails suggested," he decided. "If I found her, would she consent to abandon her evident determination to remain away from home while that villain, Durand, is in power? To San Francisco she is surely gone. There she can be found later. It would take half-a-dozen detectives to hunt her up just now. I am worried, but she is comparatively safe. I have no right to control her movements. I will work at the case until I get a clear deck for action — until she can safely return ; then she will not refuse.

Thus Le Britta tried to decide, but an hour later his anxiety for Gladys Vernon overcame his former judgment. Inquiry had given him a new clue. He had met the

manager of the dramatic company. By describing Gladys' two lady companions at the photograph studio, he was enabled to learn that they were the soubrette and the leading lady of the company.

"They started for St. Louis an hour ago," spoke the manager. "Is it something important."

"Yes. I have a very vital message for the lady who is with them."

"Oh! Miss Raven? the new lady who has engaged to play some minor parts."

That meant Gladys, and Le Britta nodded affirmatively.

"I don't think she went with them to St. Louis. I am quite certain not."

"Can you find out?" asked Le Britta, anxiously.

"Yes. Come back in two hours."

In two hours Le Britta returned.

The manager had word for him.

"I telegraphed to the leading lady on the train—had a dispatch sent and delivered at a junction," he explained.

"And her reply?"

"Here it is. You can read it for yourself."

Le Britta surveyed the reply message attentively and with expectation.

It blighted his hopes, and made the whereabouts of Gladys Vernon more a matter of doubt than ever.

For it read :

“Miss Raven did not leave city with us. She stated that she would leave company and return to her home.”

“Return to her home?” repeated the mystified Le Britta. “That cannot be — she would not do that — where can she have gone?”

The long day through he sought for Gladys Vernon, but did not find her. Eventide brought no solution to the mystery of her whereabouts, and that evening Jera Le Britta appeared at the hotel that was the headquarters of his friends, with a wearied and a heavy heart.

He had dismissed the thought of personally tracing down Gladys Vernon for the present, and had gone to a local detective agency late in the afternoon.

Le Britta had no idea of mixing up the police with a case where secrecy and family respectability were important elements, and

he had so informed the officer who was detailed to consult with him.

"I come to you on a complicated case," Le Britta had said, "but I ask you only to consider one phase of it. A young lady has disappeared. I wish to learn where she has gone — how and when she left the city."

Le Britta therewith detailed the connection of Gladys Vernon with the dramatic company, and gave a description of her.

He told the officer where he would be found until the following morning, and then made his way to the hotel.

His friends greeted him with reproaches for his neglect of them, but good-naturedly, and soon the influence of friendly banter and jovial companionship dispelled the clouds of anxiety that oppressed Le Britta's mind.

For the time being, engaged in discussions of art and of conclave matters, he forgot Gladys Vernon. He was the enthusiastic artist once more, in love with his profession, and ably defending his theories in regard to the best lines followed in producing and perfecting pictures, as he talked with several fellow-members of his craft.

Quite a coterie had gathered about him in

the lobby of the hotel, as he became engaged in an interesting argument regarding sensitive printing. Then lodge matters supervened, and the evening drifted away, industriously and satisfactorily spent.

Le Britta had gone to his room, and was about to retire for the night, when there was a tap on the door.

He answered the summons, to find one of the servants of the hotel in waiting, with a card.

"Richard Dunbar," he read, and he remembered that to be the name of the detective he had engaged.

Le Britta hurried below. He found the brisk, business-like officer awaiting him.

"You have something to report?" queried Le Britta, anxiously.

"Yes."

"You have found a clue?"

"We have accomplished what you wished. We have traced the girl."

"And found her?"

"No. Our labors end with learning how she left the city — where she went."

"Yes, I understand that."

"Miss Raven, as you call her, after leav-

ing the photographer's studio, returned to the Palace hotel."

"Where the dramatic company was staying?"

"Exactly."

"And then?"

"She took her satchel and hurried to the railroad depot."

"Which one?"

"The Central line. She purchased a ticket;" and in a few concise words the detective developed the fact that she had secured transportation for the station nearest to Hawthorne villa.

Le Britta could scarcely credit the information. Gladys gone home; Gladys returned to Hawthorne villa!

Why, if that was her destination, a decision undoubtedly forced by Le Britta's recognition of her, had she fled from him?

With all her dread of Ralph Durand, why should she return to the place where he would at once enforce his power of guardianship?

"I cannot understand it," murmured Le Britta, as he paid the detective and walked

out thoughtfully upon the street. "There is some mystery here."

He tried to analyze the motives that would actuate Gladys in a resolve to abandon her dramatic career, and go back to face the fate from which she had so recently fled.

For over an hour he reflected seriously over the case. He could not get it out of his mind.

More than once he told himself that he was exceeding his duty to himself and others in assuming so much anxiety and trouble for a comparative stranger, but his better nature discarded the suggestion, and he resolved to figure out the difficult problem, to find Gladys Vernon if possible.

Was it not probable that, fearing she would be followed by Le Britta, Gladys had purchased the ticket for home to throw him off the trail?

Scarcely. Her candid ingenuous nature was too guileless for that.

"The case is certainly arriving at a critical climax," soliquized Le Britta. "There must soon be some developments. The tramp in charge of Doctor Milton, the secret regarding the treasure in the ravine—these are formid-

able interests in the affair, but this girl, a refugee, homeless, affrighted — oh ! I wish I could find her, to explain that friends are acting in her behalf, that her absence complicates the matter, and places us at a disadvantage. Mercy ! *that* is the key to the enigma.”

Le Britta started violently. Of a sudden a quick suggestion had come to his mind. In a flash he discerned the truth.

“Why !” he exclaimed, with a gasp of comprehension, “I never thought of it ! Gladys Vernon has returned home — she saw Ralph Durand’s advertisement.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

BLOCKED.

THE next train on the Central left in two hours. Le Britta’s decision had been quickly suggested and formed — he would go to Hawthorne villa.

There he was certain he would find Gladys Vernon. Thither he was positive the homeless orphan had returned.

When Gladys had fled from her home, she

believed her lover, Sydney Vance, to be a fugitive. The advertisement inserted in the newspapers by Ralph Durand proved that he was in the power of that villainous plotter, at least that Durand knew of his whereabouts.

That carefully-worded initial advertisement contained a terrible threat for the frantic fugitive. If she would save her lover's life, she had better return at once to Hawthorne villa, it suggested.

What more natural, therefore, than that she had so decided to do. Unequal to a strife where villainy held the whip-hand, Gladys had heart brokenly abandoned the contest. Before Le Britta could reach Hawthorne villa to intercept her, to warn her, she would have placed herself under the baleful power of the miscreant, Ralph Durand!

Le Britta took the train with an oppressed heart. Some how, he felt that he was going to meet disaster, that, armed with some power not yet fully developed, Durand would drive him from the field completely at their next interview. He had started on a quest, however, and he would not abandon it, and he settled himself down in a seat to reflect, to formulate his plan of procedure if he

found Gladys an inmate of the villa, when a hand slapped him familiarly on the shoulder.

"Hello, Le Britta !" spoke a bluff, hearty voice, and its owner pressed into the seat without ceremony.

It proved to be one of the visitors to the conclave, who, like Le Britta, was a photographer. They had met that day, and some moments were consumed in mutually explaining how neither intended remaining for the last day's exercises.

Le Britta did not feel much like talking, but his companion was not to be rebuffed. He was a photographer of the old school, and while he was forced to acknowledge Le Britta's superior genius from the results it had manifestly attained, they never met but he forced a heated and lengthy discussion as to the merits and demerits of their respective systems.

"Well, Le Britta," spoke the man, as they drifted into their usual theme of discussion, "you still hold to your old idea that photography is an art?"

"You know me too well to doubt it."

"And I continue to hold to the theory that it is a business. I hold that certain processes

produce certain results ; invariably conditions, and results remain constant. Give me a camera, I give you a picture. If people want fine effects of light and shade, elegant surroundings depicted, and all that, let them hire a portrait-painter. Photography is a business. Tact and talent to advertise, to catch custom, is the key-note of success. A woman wants a picture of her child. I take it. You high-toned fellows make it look like an angel—pearly complexion, sparkling eyes, unnatural pose, emotional features. What's the use of all that flummery? It makes more work, and a picture is a picture, if it shows the face, is it not?"

"Yes," replied Le Britta, with a dry smile. "You might cover yourself with a suit of clothes cut out with a hatchet, but you wouldn't look well. You photograph a face in a blur of hideous brown, or an ugly background of antiquated screen-work. The face is there, that is true, but robbed of all attractions. I aim to have all the accessories in perfection, I believe in making the counterfeit presentment a gem, a treasure. Here is what perfect light can do, here is what proper posing can effect, here is what the right de-

velopment of the negative can do. Step by step I try not to rob the picture of naturalness, but to enhance its naturality, to tone down harsh lines, to soften and illuminate. What is the result? We educate people up to a higher appreciation of the service, we cultivate the uncultured, we banish botchwork, and make of the family photograph album a gallery that vies with steel-plate range in fineness, nicety of execution, and gloss of finish. I tell you, my friend, that not one detail, from the merest shade on the hair to the printing on the back of the picture, should be neglected."

"All right," was the quick reply. "You please people, you educate them—what for? To make them demand more, the more they get. You produce fine pictures, they expect finer ones. You give them too much for their money. Why, Le Britta! a photographer of the class you represent has to think, study, work—be an artist and business man in one. It don't pay"—

"It *does* pay!" interrupted Le Britta, pointedly. "There is a compensation in it all. We give the public better work at less money than in the past; for what reason?

Because invention has aided us in the mission. We are not only working for our patrons, but for ourselves. Every step we advance, we learn. Every experiment we succeed in is for our benefit, and that of the world as well. It is all well enough to make money, but how much greater to score a victory as an inventor, an improver, to give to the world some new process, some original discovery that beautifies or instructs? Look at the new photographic colors, the latest processes, the advancement in manipulating emulsions, the new ways of developing negatives, the benefit of sensitive printing paper! Why! I myself am experimenting on a new gelatine printing paper that will practically revolutionize the art in that line. You stick to the albumen paper, I suppose? Why? Because you blindly persist in shutting your eyes to newer modes. You are ten years behind the times. Some day, a bright, energetic new-process man will come to your town, open a rival establishment, and you will have to learn what I am forgetting, or abandon the business."

Le Britta talked on his pet theme for half

an hour, enthusiastically. His auditor was silenced.

"I begin to think I am a bit stubborn," he admitted, finally ; "but how do you keep posted on all these new wrinkles ? "

"By studying all current literature on the subject, by keeping in correspondence with the lights of the profession, by emulating and excelling the leaders in the photographic art ; most of all, by being in touch and harmony with the Association."

"What Association ? "

"The P. A. of A."

"Oh ! you mean " ——

"The Photographers' Association of America."

"Bah ! A regular mutual admiration society. I don't allow any set of men to dictate to me."

"Dictate ? Why, man ! join it, and, if you have a bright idea, the various members will be glad to have you dictate to them. I tell you, these photographers' conventions are a place where a man learns—an annual love-feast of the profession that every live man should attend. What are they ? An aggregation of men with progressive ideas, eager for

an interchange of sentiment, a great body that formulates the trivial ideas of the art into definite, centralized form, so as to devote time and attention to grander themes. You should attend just one convention! Here is a man with a paper on back grounds—the result of careful thought, study and investigation. Here is another with specimens of flash-light work. It is studied, analyzed, it instructs, it gives new ideas, it makes you feel that you are not simply an isolated picture-taker, but one of a great body of active, intelligent men, who get out of themselves once a year in a harmonious exchange of sentiment and opinion, and return to routine work benefited, spurred on to do something great for the advance of art and the elevation and culture of the masses. The man who pretends to be an adept photographer, and is not a member of the association, is certainly outside a charmed circle that to-day surrounds the world with a chain decked with the finest jewels of art, invention and progress.”

Whether the enthusiastic peroration convinced his companion, Le Britta did not find

out, for the station nearest to Hawthorne villa was reached as he barely concluded.

He felt refreshed at getting away from brooding anxiety concerning Gladys Vernon, however, even if temporarily, and he walked toward the Vernon mansion in the early morning light with a clear head and fixed plans as to his intentions.

"Perhaps Gladys has gone to the lawyer or the doctor," he ruminated. "I will make the villa my first point of progress, however. Ah! the servants are stirring," he continued, as he neared the house.

Le Britta advanced up the steps and rang the bell. The echoes had scarcely died away when the door was opened.

Ralph Durand had answered his ring. His face was flushed with drink, his eyes heavy and dull, as if he had been making a night of it. He scowled darkly. Then his face lighted up with a cunning, sinister expression.

"Good! The picture-taker!" he jeered. "Ah! I understand. You are a quick actor, my friend. You came here to find Gladys Vernon, my ward. You traced her here?"

"She is here, then?" breathed Le Britta.

"Yes, she is here. Come in. There is

no use quarreling with you, for I see a way to settle the whole affair speedily. You won't call in a hurry again! Come in, I say!" And he led the way to the library. "Now, then, sit down."

Le Britta regarded his host uneasily — this reception of him boded no favorable results. There was a complacent, satisfied look in Durand's face that showed that he felt sanguine on some new development of affairs.

He lit a cigar, dashed off a glass of liquor, and smiled familiarly and with insolent assurance at his unexpected visitor.

"I'm right in supposing you have been looking for Gladys Vernon?" he began.

"Yes," replied Le Britta, "I certainly have."

"And you traced her here?"

"I supposed she had come here, yes," admitted the photographer.

"You were right."

"When?"

"A few hours since."

"And she is here now?"

"She is. See here, my friend, we will settle this whole affair here and now. There has been row and trouble enough. It will do

no good to make any more. You may hound me down, employ detectives and all that, but I am in a position to defy you. You can positively prove nothing against me. As executor of the Vernon fortune, as guardian of Gladys Vernon, I take formal possession of Hawthorne villa to-day. That shuts out prying investigation and interference. You have sought for Gladys Vernon, she is here. You have sought for her former lover, Sydney Vance. You will never find him. You have tried to connect me with the murder of Gideon Vernon—a vain effort. You will return home and abandon your meddling interference now, I hope, for it will not avail you longer. Affairs have come to a basis.”

“What do you mean by a basis?” demanded Le Britta.

“I mean that Gladys Vernon has seen the folly of her ways, has decided to obey her dead uncle’s injunctions, and remain under this roof until she has attained her majority.”

Jera Le Britta looked dismayed. The statement seemed incredible, and yet the plotter spoke confidently.

“You tell me this truthfully?” he demanded.

"I do."

"Gladys is here, returned of her own free will."

"Yes."

"And consents to remain here willingly?"

"She does."

"I can scarcely credit it!"

"Ask her then."

"Eh!" ejaculated Le Britta, with a hopeful start. "I may see her?"

"Certainly."

"I may talk with her?"

"As much as you wish."

Le Britta had aroused to quick hope at the idea of seeing Gladys and conversing with her.

His heart sank, however, at the malignant triumph that glowed in Ralph Durand's face, predicting that he had some sinister design hidden under his new mask of ready acquiescence to the demands of an enemy.

Ralph Durand had proceeded to the door of the next room. His hand on the knob, he lingered.

"You wish to see Miss Vernon," he spoke, assuming a cool dignity of manner so

foreign to his usual demeanor, that it was ominously menacing.

"Yes," replied Le Britta.

Durand bowed and retired. He returned at the end of five minutes—five anxious, fluttering moments of suspense to the photographer.

"Gladys—Miss Vernon."

Jera Le Britta started forward eagerly. A great cry of joy escaped his lips as the door opened and Gladys Vernon appeared, Durand following her.

Her face was pale, her eyes downcast. Like one bound by a spell, under the dominion of some powerful tyrant, she did not look up. Her lips, tightly pressed, seemed to shut in the emotion that was tugging at her heart-strings.

"Wait!" cried Durand, in a mandatory tone, sharp, clear, resonant, as Le Britta was about to glide forward and seize Gladys' hand. "Miss Vernon is exhausted by a long journey. She bids me speak for her. Is it not so, Gladys?"

The fair young girl shuddered slightly. Then, with icy, impenetrable reserve she nodded.

“I told her you were here,” continued the miscreant. “I have asked her if she wished to see you. Her answer was — no!”

“I do not believe it! She is under some terrible constraint!” burst forth Le Britta, excitedly. “Gladys! Miss Vernon! speak! I am your friend, the friend of your friends. I wish to tell you” —

He paused. Gladys Vernon had lifted her haunted, pained eyes to his face.

“Go,” she spoke, in a low, wailing voice. “I do not wish to discuss the past. I have chosen my future. If you are my true friend, leave here, now and forever, for I shall refuse to see you again!”

And then, half-reeling, she turned from the room, leaving the petrified Le Britta overcome with consternation and despair.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AT THE VILLA.

JERA LE BRITTA left Hawthorne villa with a depressed heart one hour after his arrival there.

The mournful words of Gladys Vernon had

been decisive, the calm, mock-civil demeanor of Ralph Durand stinging as the cut of a whip. The miscreant had triumphed completely, and the photographer was bound to acknowledge the fact.

Le Britta, with bowed head and thoughtful mien walked sadly toward the village. He found the lawyer at his home, and was soon closeted with him in his library.

"I have just come from Hawthorne villa," was Le Britta's first statement, and the lawyer was at once interested.

"You have arrived at an opportune season," spoke Mr. Munson. "I have much to tell you."

"Concerning Durand, I suppose."

"Yes."

"You know that Gladys has returned to Hawthorne villa?"

"What!"

The lawyer started as if dealt a sudden blow.

Le Britta rapidly detailed his efforts to trace the heiress of Hawthorne villa, and the result of his late interview.

The narration petrified the lawyer.

"I can scarcely believe it!" he murmured,

"Gladys returned to Hawthorne villa ! Why ! if that is so, and I can only talk with her " ——

"She will refuse."

"Refuse to converse with an old friend, her dead uncle's counselor ?"

"Yes, for Durand will compel her to do so. Do you not understand yet how subtle and far-reaching are the plots of this consummate villain ? There is but one theory to advance on."

"And that is ?"

"The certainty that he has Gladys Vernon's lover, Sydney Vance, in his power."

"A prisoner ?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Then " ——

"I theorize that he has him hidden somewhere in the vicinity of the villa, or in the hands of paid emissaries at a distance. Further, he has convinced Gladys that this is so. She saw the advertisements he published. While she would never have returned willingly, the dread that her lover might be murdered, surrendered up to justice, completely overcame her. She returned to Hawthorne villa."

"And that villain, Durand" —

"Forced her to agree to carry out his wishes."

"Which are?"

"To refuse our friendly offers of assistance."

"I see."

"To remain there with seeming willingness."

The lawyer reflected deeply. His face grew stern. He related the discovery about the missing hundred thousand dollars.

Le Britta was surprised, but enlightened. He understood now what the treasure amounted to which the tramp had located in the ravine.

"Then," he said, "if the missing money is not found, Durand is beaten completely?"

"No, he is only handicapped."

"I do not understand."

"Why, if that amount of ready cash was in his possession, he would begin his fraudulent operations at once. He would pretend to invest with the aid of accomplices, he would dissipate the money, seemingly legally, but in reality to get it eventually into his

own hands. As it is, the scheme will take more time to work."

"How?"

"He will claim that the mortgage cripples him; that he has not sufficient means to pay interest and living expenses. He will sell the mining property at a ruinous sacrifice, the villa, every thing, any thing, in fact, to handle ready cash."

"But that will take time."

"Yes."

"And time is all I ask!" spoke Le Britta, with determined eyes. "He holds the upper hand now. Wait!"

Le Britta did not enlighten the lawyer as to his intentions, nor concerning his discovery of the hiding-place of the treasure.

He wished to investigate that branch of the case alone. More than that, he resolved, in case he found the money, to withhold it from Durand's hands, if he had to retain personal secret possession of it until Gladys came of age.

He correctly and readily surmised that one motive Durand had in wishing Gladys' return was to learn of the missing money, and he wondered what Durand's next move would

be, when he ascertained that the heiress was entirely ignorant concerning it.

The lawyer had arrived at a commonplace decision that they could only wait until something had developed, but Le Britta left him with a far more serious and definite thought in his mind.

He had but one hope of ultimately defeating all the plots of Ralph Durand, and that was based on the recovery of the tramp. In case Doctor Milton brought him through his illness, and in case, furthermore, the tramp would give his evidence against Durand, the affair was ended.

Then Gladys Vernon would forever be free from the plotter's wiles, Sydney Vance might return and face his fellow-men once more, and the efforts of the photographer to right a great wrong would be crowned with success.

But the tramp might not recover. If he did it might be too late. Durand was no lax schemer. He had Gladys Vernon in his power. Suppose he should force the girl to wed him; suppose he should dispose of what little wealth the mortgage had left in sight; suppose he should do away with Sydney Vance, for the testimony of the latter

on the witness-stand would alone convict Durand, were it not that Vance was himself suspected of the crime of killing old Gideon Vernon?

“The tramp is safe with Doctor Milton,” mused Le Britta, “the hidden money is in the ravine, and I hold the clue to its whereabouts. Sydney Vance is the element of mystery in the case. How can I get an inkling as to his place of incarceration?”

Le Britta was wearied from his long quest, and, going to the hotel, he sought the rest he so needed.

At nightfall he started again for Hawthorne villa. He approached it by a circuitous route, for his inspection of the mansion was to be a covert one.

He had decided to watch at a distance, in the hopes of seeing Durand, theorizing that if Sydney Vance was anywhere in the vicinity, the plotter might go to visit him, and, by following, he might locate the refugee and captive.

After remaining in the neighborhood for over an hour, Le Britta became impatient. There had not been the slightest trace of activity about the villa — no lights, no serv-

ants visible. He came nearer to the house. It was closely shuttered. He penetrated the grounds, he even peered in at unguarded windows. There was no sign of life about the gloomy place.

Just leaving the grounds, he came to a halt as a carriage and two horses came toiling along the sandy road.

He recognized the driver on the box—it was the steward whom Ralph Durand had employed a few days previous, and as he dismounted to open the iron gates he spied Le Britta.

“Looking for anybody?” he queried, in a suspicious tone of voice.

“Yes,” Le Britta was forced to say, “Mr. Durand.”

“Oh, him! He’s gone.”

“Gone, where?”

“Away on business. I just drove him over country to catch an east-bound train. He’s ordered me to close the villa for the next month. He won’t be back for some time.”

“Where will a letter reach him?” ventured Le Britta.

“Address in my care,” was the keen re-

sponse. "Say, I know you, and I know what you're after—a trace of Miss Vernon. Well, I've this to say to you, and that ends it—she's been sent to some friends by Mr. Durand, several hundred miles from here, and you won't be very likely to find her by seeking."

As he spoke, the man coolly led his horses into the grounds, and closed the gates on the dismayed Le Britta.

Ralph Durand had scored another victory. He had got the whole game in his hands, and had covered his tracks by a timely disappearance.

"Beaten—thrown off the trail!" murmured Le Britta, slowly walking down the road. "I can do positively nothing. Gladys has been spirited away, Vance, too, probably, and, at a distance, Durand will mature his plans, whatever they may be. A month! Why! in that time the scoundrel may force Gladys to marry him, dispose of Vance, realize on the mortgaged real estate, and so complicate affairs as to leave nothing but wreck and ruin in his wake. I give it up at last, I have tried to help the poor girl, and"—

Le Britta paused abruptly and started with

a shock, for at just that moment a wild form rushed down the road, fairly colliding with him.

Then, with a quick, excited ejaculation, the new-comer grabbed Le Britta's arm, and peered into his face, keenly and excitedly.

"I've found you — good!"

Le Britta started and thrilled, for, wonder of wonders! the speaker was — Dr. Richard Milton!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GONE!

THE last man in the world Jera Le Britta would have expected to see at Hawthorne villa, Dr. Richard Milton, gazed fixidly at his friend.

The photographer was almost too astonished to speak, but he managed to gasp forth:

"Dick — Doctor, Dick! What in the world" —

"Brought me here?"

"Yes."

"After you."

"After me!"

"Exactly, I have been looking everywhere for you."

"Why" ——

Doctor Milton took his companion's arm and walked on with him.

"I followed you to the city," he explained. "I found you had left the conclave, I imagined you had come here, not having gone home. What news, Jera?"

Le Britta felt positive that his friend had some important disclosure to make, but he repressed his curiosity and suspense and briefly narrated the developments in the Vernon case since last they had met.

The doctor was an interested listener, a startled one too, as he learned of the last move on the part of Ralph Durand.

"The scoundrel has indeed check-mated your every move," he commented. "It's plain to me what his plans are."

"Then you think?" ——

"That he has terrorized Gladys Vernon completely, has removed her to some secluded retreat, where she will be a virtual prisoner in the hands of paid emissaries, that he has removed the lover Vance likewise to a new prison-place. He holds Vance's life

and liberty in his keeping. By this means he silences the girl. Meantime he will proceed to negotiate a sale on the mortgaged property unhampered by the girl's interference, probably armed with her written consent to do so, and without fear of you or her other friends troubling him."

"But the ready money, the fortune, the hundred thousand dollars—he has not that!"

"No, he has probably considered that as lost to him."

"And we have it—we know where it is!"

"No, I fear we do not," interrupted Doctor Milton, seriously.

"Eh? Why! what do you mean, Dick?"

Le Britta came to a sudden standstill, and viewed his friend with a startled look, for the voice and manner of the latter had grown decidedly ominous.

"It was that money—that hidden treasure of old Gideon Vernon's that brought me down here."

"The money—the hidden treasure?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It is in danger!"

"The treasure in danger!"

"Decidedly so."

"I do not understand you."

"The patient."

"You mean the tramp?"

"Exactly. You know the condition you left him in—delirious. Well, that next day he got suddenly better. The case perplexed me. One hour he would be rational, the next raving. I encouraged the former mood, even to the taxing of his vitality, and began to administer a strong stimulant. Yesterday evening he was sleeping quietly when I left him. I went to call on a patient. When I returned"—

Doctor Milton paused impressively and sighed—a troubled, anxious sigh.

"When I returned," he repeated, in conclusion, "the tramp was—gone!"

"Gone!" cried Le Britta, with a violent start and in blank wonderment, "you mean!"

"Disappeared."

"Then he had escaped?"

"Rather, gone away. With him was missing the bottle from which I had administered the stimulating medicine. I am now satisfied that the tramp had possessed his senses all day. He watched me. He realized his situation.

His wounded arm was no detriment to getting around. It was the fever, the frequent fits of delirium that bothered him, and his weakness. I believe he recalled how he had imparted his secret to us. I think he regretted it. At all events, he had arisen, dressed himself, and taking the stimulant and a bottle of brandy with him, had disappeared."

"You followed him"—

"I tried to. At first I thought he had wandered away in delirium. I never imagined he could go far in his terribly weak condition. Then in a flash, I thought of an impelling motive for his flight—the hidden treasure. I knew not of the success or failure of your efforts to secure a copy of the missing half of his written secret. I had men search in the vicinity of my office and throughout the town. No trace. I started for the conclave after you. I hoped to find you here, and here I came. That is how I happen to be here."

The doctor's graphic story bewildered and yet aroused Le Britta.

His eyes scintillated with anxiety and excitement.

"Dick!" he ejaculated, "we must find that man."

"I should say so!"

"You think he came here?"

"I think he started for here."

"In quest of the hidden treasure?"

"What else?"

"He may have fallen by the way."

"That is probable, but this is the end of the trail to guard. Possibly I am here ahead of him. He would have to travel slowly. There is no doubt in my mind but that he has changed his mind, and, his strength returned and his old covetousness revived, he wishes to secure the treasure."

"We must stop him!"

"Rather anticipate him. You see, Le Britta, he may not have arrived. If we secure the treasure or find it intact, one of us will remain at the spot where it is hidden and await the tramp's coming. The other, if he does not soon arrive, will go back toward home, and try to find him on the way hither."

"Dick! you are a jewel to plan!" spoke Le Britta, gratefully. "That will be the move to make, for, if the tramp has his senses

again, all the more reason than ever that we keep him closely guarded and near us."

"You mean?"

"That we may as soon as possible confront that villain Durand with him, and clip his wings effectually by proving him, on the tramp's clear evidence, to be the murderer of old Gideon Vernon!"

The two friends hurried on, Le Britta leading the way toward the nearest house.

"Wait here," he said, upon reaching a small cottage.

He disappeared down the graveled walk, and the waiting doctor heard him knock at the rear door. Then there was a brief parley, and Le Britta reappeared.

"I've borrowed a lantern," he announced,

"Then you intend"——

"To go at once to the ravine."

"You think you can locate the spot?"

"Where the treasure is secreted? — we must!"

"And at night!"

"The tramp may arrive at any moment. I have explicit directions from the message he had written. I looked over the ground to-day, but believed the treasure to be safe

enough for a later visit, and my thoughts and time were occupied with poor Gladys Vernon's affairs. If we can only recover the tramp, her persecutions are over."

"And Ralph Durand's just began."

"Yes. Here we are. Down the path here—this is certainly the way Gideon Vernon came the night of the murder, according to the tramp's statement. There is the large stone described. Hold the lantern. Here is a clump of bushes. That's it! Hold the lantern higher. Now, then, hand it down to me."

Le Britta, with the contents of the written key to the secret treasure well memorized, had led his companion down the ravine.

Step by step he had traced out the location of the spot where Gideon Vernon had put away his ready cash fortune to prevent it falling into unfriendly hands, and had died ere he could communicate the secret to his niece, Gladys.

"Here is the rock described," spoke Le Britta, eagerly. "Yes, this is the exact spot, but"—

An ejaculation of consternation escaped his lips. Dr. Richard Milton leaned over the

edge of the ravine, thrilling at its ominous echo.

“What is it?” he queried, in suspense.
“You have located the right spot?”

“Yes.”

“And the treasure”——

“We are too late!” announced Le Britta, in a hollow tone of voice; “the treasure is — gone!”

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN GLOOM.

GONE!

Yes, the treasure was gone. The dismayed Le Britta knew it at a glance, the startled Doctor Milton realized the fact in a very few moments of time.

It had been there, and recently too. The correct hiding-place of the fortune had been located. All these facts were soon verified, but—the situation could be summed up in five little words —

They had come too late!

The tramp, Doctor Milton's mysterious patient, had preceded them.

As Doctor Milton sprang down the rocky

ledge to the side of his friend, and viewed the spot in the flickering rays of the lantern, he saw at a glance that there was real cause for anxiety and consternation.

There lay a great flat stone overturned.

In the soft yielding earth beneath was the impress of a broad wallet.

The dirt was disturbed, and the spot showed evidences of a recent visit.

At first, the two friends feared that their startling discovery might have some connection with the flight of Ralph Durand.

They momentarily chilled, as they reflected that he might have discovered the hiding-place of the fortune, have secured the treasure, and have disappeared with it.

But, no ! Lying on the ground near the stone was a piece of white cloth, and, picking it up, Doctor Milton announced :

“The tramp was here !”

“You are sure ?” breathed Le Britta, anxiously.

“Positive.”

“Why ?”

“You see this piece of cloth ?”

“Yes.”

"It is one of the bandages I placed on his arm."

"Which he dropped here?"

"In his rough haste in securing the treasure, yes. That is the only solution to the affair. The tramp has anticipated us. The treasure is gone."

"Oh! why did I not come here early this morning," groaned Le Britta.

"No matter about that now."

"We must try to find the tramp."

"It will be more difficult to trace a man unknown than a person like Ralph Durand. Le Britta, I fear we are at odds with fate. We have lost the game."

It looked so. Within an hour the two friends were at the village.

Promised reward spurred the town officials to send out their men in quest of the tramp as described by the photographer.

All the next day both Le Britta and the doctor personally scoured the country for some trace of the man who had rewarded their kindness by carrying away a royal fortune.

Two nights later, discouraged and baffled,

the friends left the vicinity of Hawthorne villa.

The doctor was nettled at being beaten ; Le Britta felt discouraged, disheartened.

As a sudden storm sweeps a hill-top of verdure in a moment of time, or a swooping breeze changes the whole aspect of a placid pool, so had the past two days disintegrated and demolished the fabric of plot, counter-plot and complication which had presented itself as a tangible labyrinth to Le Britta.

Not a clue was in sight. Durand had disappeared, taking with him Gladys Vernon and Sydney Vance.

The tramp had secured the hidden fortune, and was not to be found.

Justice slept ; the right had been defeated ; wrong and cunning were seemingly triumphant.

All that Le Britta had done in the interest of justice had, it seemed, been of no avail.

Home and its endearments looked dark, with a return signalized by disaster and defeat, and duty half accomplished.

"That is the end of the Vernon case !" sighed Doctor Milton, as the train neared home.

"No," replied Le Britta, "I cannot believe it. It only sleeps — we are shut out from further present investigation, villainy is triumphant, innocence persecuted, but — 'the mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small!' I feel in my heart that we shall yet be called upon to champion anew the cause of poor Gladys Vernon.' I feel that yet, face to face, skill for skill, plot for plot, blow for blow, I shall meet that double-hearted scoundrel, Ralph Durand, and vanquish him!"

Prophetic words! The hour was to dawn, the great Vernon case was to be revived, but at a time and in a manner little dreamed of by the true-hearted photographer!

For the present it slumbered, for the time being all its obscured issues were hidden completely from the public view.

And Jera Le Britta resumed his duties as citizen, friend and a man of family, with many a longing thought of the lives held under the cruel domination of Ralph Durand's wicked power, until one night, one dark, stormy night, when the wind howled dismally and the rain beat frantically at casement and threshold, and the great wings of the storm

flapped out the light of moon and stars, the gifted artist opened the book of his life at a new and an eventful page.

CHAPTER XXX.

A STRANGE GUIDE.

FIERCE rose the tempest; darker and wilder grew the night.

Such a night! Jera Le Britta drew his coat closer about his neck, drove his hat down over his brow, bent his head to the storm and plodded along the muddy road, splashing in and out great ruts and puddles and almost blindly forcing his way forward on his mission.

A mission in keeping with the night and its devastating influences. A mission of life or death, a self-imposed duty that stern necessity had urged upon him.

For over a month he had been busy at his studio. Since the distressing climax in the affairs of the Vernons, Le Britta had devoted his energies to his profession with renewed vigor and enterprise.

The season was a brisk one and it had

been all work — little time for study or experiment. He had to catch up — to pay with double labor for the hours he had bestowed on the affairs of others. There were old orders to fill, and new ones to attend to. His industrious assistant, Maud, had her hands full. Le Britta found barely time to write to the Vernon lawyer, only to receive the disheartening reply that no trace of Gladys or Durand had been discovered.

The afternoon preceding that stormy night, Doctor Milton had received a call from a patient some thirty miles distant, who, hearing of his rare skill, had sent for him. The doctor had taken the train for his destination, but just at dusk Le Britta received a telegram bearing his friend's signature.

It told Le Britta briefly that the doctor had found his patient in an extremely critical condition ; that he needed a certain medicine not to be obtained in the town near the home of his patient, and it asked him to go to his office and secure a certain phial. This he was to hand to the express messenger on the evening train, with instructions to deliver it to a messenger waiting at the depot of the town from which the telegram was dated.

Circumstances tended to interfere with this arrangement, however. In the first place, the message was delayed in its delivery ; in the next place, Le Britta found some difficulty in securing the bottle the doctor needed.

When he hurried to the depot to catch the express messenger, it was to see the train just moving away.

"No train until midnight now," ruminated Le Britta, concernedly. "I declare, it's too bad ! Doctor Dick will be expecting the medicine. He wouldn't go to all this trouble about it if it wasn't important. He must have it. What had I better do. I'll take it to him."

Le Britta at once framed a dispatch to the station-agent at the town where the doctor was, asking him to inform Doctor Milton's messenger that he had missed the train, but would deliver the medicine in person as soon as a fast horse could carry him thither.

Then, arranging some little studio details that were necessary, Le Britta proceeded to the nearest livery-stable and obtained the fastest light turnout in the establishment.

It was dusk when he started. One hour

later the storm overtook him. The darkness was intense, the road unfamiliar.

Crash ! off went a wheel in a deep rut. With a neigh of pain the horse sank down, its forefoot disabled by a slip.

A light showed near by—the only one visible on the dreary landscape. Le Britta hurried toward it, leading the horse. He rapidly directed the humble occupant of the house to care for the steed until the morrow, inquired his way, and started on foot for his destination, which, he learned, was five miles straight ahead.

He was sorry that he had undertaken the difficult task, less than a mile on his course. The storm had redoubled its fury, the wind now blew a perfect hurricane, and the rain came down in sheets. In doubt he groped his way forward.

“ ‘Straight ahead,’ he said,” murmured Le Britta, grimly, at last, as, wearied and breathless, he shrank to a tree for shelter. “It strikes me that I am going decidedly crooked. Hello ! I see my mistake now. This is no road, it is not even a path—I have strayed from the highway—I am lost !”

Ruefully Le Britta surveyed his surround-

ings. Not a light glowed in the vicinity. He was entirely at sea as to the distance, location and even direction. The country was moderately thickly settled in portions, however, and he felt assured that forward progress would eventually bring him to some habitation.

On he plodded. Knee-deep he stumbled into a bog. He struggled out of it to fall into a pit. He clambered out of that to dash into a lot of briars.

Wet, dismayed, harassed, the photographer almost despaired of reaching his friend Doctor Milton before midnight. With a glow of hope, he suddenly hurried forward, however.

"A light!" he ejaculated. "It seems quite near at hand, too. If I can find some farmer to hitch up and drive me to the town where Dick is, I shall be all right."

It took Le Britta fully an hour to gain the light that was less than half a mile distant. A more desolate tract of land he had never traversed. At one place quarry excavations showed, at another felled timber almost obstructed his progress; but finally, soaked and panting from his arduous exertions, Le

Britta came out upon a barren open space, with about as miserable an apology for a human habitation as he had ever seen, a few rods beyond him.

It was a hut that the poorest of the poor might consent to call home, and then only under protest. It had but one window, and that held only one whole pane of glass. Through it, from a candle set on a rude deal-table within a sparingly furnished room, emanated the glow that had been, to him, a beacon to safety and shelter.

The dripping eaves and the sides of the hut were, however, a shield from the driving wind, and Le Britta paused there and glanced curiously in at the window.

A little wood fire blazed in the fireplace. Near it, her head held in one hand in a thoughtful, wearied pose, was a little girl of about eleven years.

Her attire was of the coarsest and commonest fabrics, threadbare, and in places frayed and tattered, but wonderfully clean. Abject poverty surrounded her. It spoke in the bare walls, the broken fragments of food on the table, the pinched, wan face of the child.

That face, however, had something so pathetic in it, something so strange and pleading, that Le Britta's heart stirred and thrilled as he gazed at its pure clear-cut profile, as if he was surveying some artistic portrait.

He went around to the door and knocked. The next minute it was opened.

"Who is it?" spoke the child, in a sweet, gentle tone of voice.

"A stranger," responded Le Britta, "I have lost my way in the storm. Are you all alone here, my child? Can I get no one to guide me to Bayville?"

Something in the sweet, loving face turned toward him, puzzled him. The girl seemed to look at him, and yet beyond him with a blank, far-away expression in her strange eyes.

"There is no one who could do that but myself," she said. "It is only a quarter of a mile to the road, and a mile down that to Bayville."

"Ah!" exclaimed Le Britta, "so near? Thank you. I can find my way."

"I fear not, if you are a stranger," responded the girl in the same soft, well-modu-

lated tones. "There are deep pits to pass, and to a stranger on such a night it would be dangerous. Wait, sir, till I get my cloak and hood, and I will lead you as far as the road."

"Oh, thank you!"

Le Britta stepped inside the hut. The child walked about like one in a dream, so slow and yet gliding were her movements. She proceeded to a cupboard, and took out a well-worn hood and cloak.

"I am ready," she said.

Le Britta retreated through the open doorway. The little girl followed him, softly closed the door, sighed anxiously, and then seemed to grope out toward him.

"Let me take your hand," she said, sweetly. "That is it," as he grasped the little hand within his own. "Now, only keep by my side, and be careful not to stumble. Only, let me guide you."

"If you had a lantern," suggested Le Britta, somehow deeply interested in the gentle and careful movements of his strange guide.

"A lantern?" repeated the child, softly.

"We have one, but it would be of no use to me."

"No use — why?"

"No, for — I am blind!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE BLIND GIRL.

BLIND!

Jera Le Britta stopped suddenly. For the moment he was rendered speechless with the surprise the simple, pathetic announcement caused him.

"Blind!" he ejaculated, finally. "Oh! my child."

"You fear to trust me to guide you?" smiled the little girl. "You need not. Why, I know every foot of the way, with no eyes at all, better than those who have two of them. Keep tight hold of my hand, only trust to me. I will not let you fall into any of the pits, or fall myself, never fear!"

Jera Le Britta confessed to mingled emotions the strangest he had ever experienced.

The situation was thrilling. He shuddered, as even in the blackness of the night

he could see deep excavations yawning at the sides of the narrow path they pursued. His guide advanced slowly, but unhesitatingly. Sure-footed, possessed of some rare instinctive gift of perception, she at last led her startled companion to a point where a broad highway ran, and down its far length gleamed the lights of the town he had sought so vainly.

For the present, however, Jera Le Britta's thoughts were not on Doctor Milton or his mission of the night. He forgot storm and discomfort amid the deepest, tenderest interest in the little child before him.

His heart was touched at her misfortune, something in the sweet, pure face brought the tears of pity and love to his eyes, and made his heart beat the faster with sympathy.

"I do not know how to thank you," he said, pressing a bank note in her palm.

"This is money, is it not?" she asked, simply.

"Yes."

"And you can spare it—I have earned it honestly?"

"Ten times over!" cried Le Britta, deeply

touched at the earnest probity of his little guide.

"I thank you very much, then," she said pathetically, "for I need it."

"You do not live in that lonely place alone, surely?" spoke Le Britta.

"Almost," was the answer. "My aunt, who is old and poorly, comes over once a week from a farm on the ridge, where she works, to stay all night, and mend my clothes, and do things I cannot about the house. She brings me food, too, but I earn quite a little, carrying water to the quarry-workers, daytimes."

"But your father — your mother?"

"My mother died two years ago," was the answer, with a slight sob. "My father has not been here since her funeral. He took to drink, but I am keeping the house for him. They wanted to send me to the poor-house, but I wouldn't go. I promised my angel mother to keep a shelter for poor father's head, and I stay at the old hut. He will come some day — oh, yes!" And the little matronly creature sighed wisely, like a guardian over a wayward charge. "Some day he will get tired of the cruel drink, and will

come home to nursing, and comfort, and love !”

“Poor, afflicted child !”

Murmuring the words, Jera Le Britta stood gazing after her as she bade him good-by, and started back the way she had come.

He trembled for her safety, but, as the darkness swallowed her up, he realized how futile would be his blind gropings along that narrow path ; he recalled her confident assurances that she knew every foot of the way, and had traversed it a thousand times.

“I shall not lose sight of the poor child,” he told himself, as he started down the road. “How wicked for humanity blessed with sight and reason to complain at trifles, when that little waif is deprived of the gift of seeing, of friends, of even a decent shelter, and yet patiently, almost cheerfully, assumes her cross ! She interests me, she appeals to my sympathy. I shall try and brighten her condition in some way.”

Le Britta pursued his way. He little dreamed that he was indeed to see the little child again, and that, too, sooner than he had expected ; that her influence was to cast a singular glow over his life, and to become

strangely mingled with the plots that had affected his recent interest in the great Vernon case.

"The town at last," sighed Le Britta, as wearied and wet to the skin he reached a tavern.

Brief inquiries located the doctor and his patient. Dr. Richard Milton greeted Le Britta warmly, gratefully, when he heard his narrative of the night's adventures. He explained the importance of the medicine he had brought.

"I shall be with my patient most of the night," he said. "You had better go to the hotel, and get dry and keep warm after the terrible exposure of the night."

"Can I not help you in any way?"

"No, thanks. I will call for you in the morning."

"And we will return home together."

"Exactly."

This was agreed on. Le Britta left the doctor with his patient in a gloomy old mansion, and was soon tucked in a comfortable bed, and in the land of dreams.

Doctor Milton appeared at dawn to report his patient past the crisis and on the road to

recovery, thanks to the potent medicine that the photographer had brought, and they had breakfast together.

Le Britta had not forgotten the little blind girl. As they strolled toward the railroad depot he related the details of his meeting with the child.

"We have time to spare. Shall we go and see her?" he asked.

"I don't care," replied Doctor Milton. "It is two hours to train time yet."

"I think I can find the hut," spoke Le Britta. "Yes, it was in that direction, and—look, Dick, look!"

Le Britta excitedly seized his companion's arm and pointed down the road.

"Eh? What is it, Jera?"

"The very child!"

"The blind girl?"

"Yes."

An advancing figure enchained their mutual attention. It was that of the blind child, and she was hurrying toward the town as fast as she could walk.

Le Britta advanced to intercept her.

"Wait, wait, my child!" he said, seizing her arm.



P. 183.—“Lift your veil, please.”

The blind girl lifted her face to that of the speaker with a quick, pleased smile.

"I know you — I remember your voice!" she cried.

"Indeed?" murmured Le Britta.

"Yes, you are the gentleman who gave me the money last night. Oh, sir! do not detain me just now. Oh, sir! I have such news!"

Her face was aglow with emotion and excitement as she spoke.

"Why are you going to the village — what is your hurry?" queried Le Britta.

"I will tell you," she half-whispered, her features scintillating with joy — "oh, sir! *he* has come back!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

CLUE OR MISTAKE?

"HE has come back!"

The illuminated face of the little child, the accents of pride, delight and affection in her gentle voice, were indescribable as she uttered the fervent words. Deeply interested, Le Britta asked:

"You mean your father?"

"Yes, poor old father! I knew it, I told you so. He's come back, but, oh!" and the face fell to sadness and anxiety, "he's come back so worn, so ill, may be dying!" she concluded, in a tone sunk to a whisper of terror.

The two friends exchanged glances of interest and sympathy.

"And where were you going?" asked Le Britta.

"To the village. I must get a doctor. The money you gave me last night will pay for one, will it not."

"My friend here with me is a physician," interrupted the photographer.

"Oh! I am so glad."

"And he will charge you nothing. Come, doctor, we may be of use to the child's father."

"Oh! how kind you are," murmured the girl, fervently.

She led the way from the town, the others following. Her accuracy of step engrossed the doctor. She seemed to feel her way with her feet, and never stumbled or made a misstep.

Into the wretched hut Edna—for she had told them that was her name—ushered them.

“Where is your father?” asked Le Britta. Edna pointed to the next room.

“He is in there. You will try and make him well, won’t you?”

“We will, indeed!”

Doctor Milton removed his hat, and advanced to the door of the little apartment. He entered it. Le Britta, watching the girl, was startled by a sudden ejaculation a minute later. Immediately thereafter, Doctor Milton, with a startled face, reappeared.

“Le Britta!” he almost gasped, “come here.”

“What is it, Dick?”

Doctor Milton pointed to a low cot on which lay the figure of a man.

“Do you know him?” he queried.

“How should I, a stranger?”

“Look closer.”

“Mercy! Dick, it is”——

“The tramp!”

Staring in unfeigned amazement, the two friends stood regarding the figure on the couch.

It was the tramp—the beneficiary of Dr. Richard Milton's kindness in the past—the homeless wanderer who had imparted to them the secret of the hidden treasure in the ravine at Hawthorne villa.

Thinner, paler, weaker than ever, there he lay. The man they had sought for so arduously and unsuccessfully, the man who had evidently secured the Vernon fortune, was before them.

Satisfaction at his discovery was obscured by the profound surprise experienced by both Le Britta and the doctor, as they marveled at the strange workings of providence that had brought the man hither, that had led them to his side.

"Dick, it's fate!" gasped Le Britta.

"It is a marvelous occurrence," assented the doctor. "Evidently, he is little Edna's father. His condition shows that he was forced to find shelter, to seek rest and nursing, or die."

"Is he very ill?"

"Give me time to ascertain."

For over an hour, Dr. Richard Milton worked over the invalid. Finally he returned to the larger room, where little Edna

sat, a prey to vivid emotions that showed plainly on her impressionable face. Light as was his footstep, she caught its sound and glided to his side.

"Is he very ill, doctor?" she queried, solicitously.

"Yes."

"Will he — will he — die?"

"I think not. We shall do all we can for him, at least."

The doctor beckoned to Le Britta, and both went outside the hut.

"Well?" queried the latter, eagerly.

"The final reaction has come," announced the doctor.

"You mean?"

"Collapse."

"He is conscious."

"No — fever! I can only theorize as to how he has passed the days since his escape from us. The stimulant phial has probably kept up an artificial strength. He secured the treasure — wandered here, and — it will be days, it may be weeks, before he knows another lucid moment.

Le Britta looked anxious.

"And the money — the fortune — the hundred thousand dollars?" he began.

The doctor shook his head dubiously.

"I have taken the precaution of searching him," he said. "He had not so much as a single dollar about him."

"Then he must have hidden it somewhere."

"It looks so."

"Where, I wonder?"

"That we must find out."

"How?"

"You shall see. We must be patient and cautious this time. This man's secret is an important one to Gladys Vernon. I must return to my patients, and you need not neglect your business. Leave it all to me."

At noon that day, the two friends left for home by rail.

Doctor Milton had secured the services of a young medical student. The latter was a warm friend of the doctor, and he intrusted him with just sufficient knowledge of the circumstances of the case, to be sure he would act with promptness and fidelity in his interests.

He introduced the young man at the hut as a nurse for the invalid, and little Edna

thanked them sobbingly for the comforts with which they surrounded herself and her suffering father.

"And now we must wait patiently," announced Doctor Milton, as they reached home.

"For what?" queried Le Britta.

"For word from the man in charge of the tramp."

"Concerning the treasure?"

"Concerning everything about the tramp of interest to us, yes. He will not allow his patient to escape again. As soon as he recovers or becomes conscious, he is to telegraph for us."

Several days passed by with only a formal report as to the condition of the tramp. Toward the latter part of the week, however, Doctor Milton received a letter, the contents of which excited him strangely.

He hastened to Le Britta's studio, and was soon closeted with the photographer.

"News?" queried the latter, eagerly.

"Yes, important news. Read that."

It was a letter from the young medical student. It detailed the course of the tramp's fever, and it ended with the words:

“You gave me just an inkling of the fact that your main anxiety outside of the man’s recovery, was to learn where he had hidden certain moneys.

“This fact I have not positively ascertained, but from words spoken by the invalid I can give you a clue.

“Years ago, he was quite a successful business man, and had a partner. His child verifies this.

“Of this partner he has raved considerably, and I am satisfied that he has recently seen him.

“More than that, I am satisfied that he visited this man, and intrusted to him a large amount of money — possibly the money you are so anxious about.

“Later, he again visited him and demanded his money back. The man denied ever receiving it.

“This man lives in the city. His name is”——

Le Britta started incredulously as he read the words that followed.

For they constituted a name belonging to one of the greatest social lights, one of the wealthiest merchants of the city where the

conclave had just been held — Darius Meredith.

A clue or — a mistake ! Which?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HYPNOTISM.

“MR. LE BRITTA !”

The name was spoken amid a glare of splendor and light. It announced a guest in the drawing-room of one of the stateliest mansions in the city.

For a week the photographer had planned for this moment, which was to mark the initial step in a new venture that had for its motive the final securing of the Vernon treasure.

Upon the receipt of that letter from the medical student in charge of the tramp, the doctor and Le Britta had held a long, serious conversation.

Then a hurried visit to the city had ensued, a secret investigation into the character of Darius Meredith, and then the two friends had arrived at a definite conclusion.

From what they could learn of the tramp's past, and his association with this man,

Meredith, one fact seemed certain — they had once been business partners.

To the world Meredith was an honored, successful business man, in reality he was a thoroughly bad-hearted man. It made the open-minded Le Britta sick at soul, to contemplate so much hypocrisy veiled by the mask of social eminence.

Meredith was a gambler, a usurer, a hard-fisted employer. Many a dishonorable quirk in his business evidenced his deceit and wickedness, and the two friends soon knew the man they had to handle.

Of a surety, from what they learned, the tramp, after securing the treasure, weak, sick, fearful of pursuit, had gone to the partner of his better days, and had intrusted to his charge the custody of the precious packet that contained the Vernon treasure.

Later, demanding its return, he had been repulsed, ejected from the sumptuous home of Meredith, and even threatened with arrest.

Meredith certainly had the money. How to establish that fact beyond a legal doubt, and recover it, was now the mission of Le Britta, and it would prove a delicate and a difficult task, he felt sure.

Finally, his plan was developed, however. Through a letter from Doctor Milton he secured an invitation to the home of a lady who was a belle in city society, and where he knew Meredith was an honored guest.

Upon the evening in question, arrayed in full evening dress, his courtly bearing and familiarity with the usages of good society enabling him to act his part circumspectly, Le Britta found himself in the gay drawing-rooms of the fashionable mansion.

Its fair hostess greeted him cordially. An hour later, Le Britta had secured an introduction to Meredith. Before the evening had passed he had succeeded in winning the complete good graces of the man.

The next evening they met again. Two nights thereafter, to the satisfaction of Le Britta, Meredith invited him to his home.

It was the culmination of his hopes. He was working slowly, deftly, for a result.

As he rang at the portals of the stately home of Darius Meredith that evening, the photographer's eyes flashed confidently as he murmured :

"The opportunity has arrived ! It will be a battle to the finish, instead of an evening

call, Mr. Darius Meredith, and I shall win !”

As he spoke he fondled in his coat-pocket a tiny phial that Dr. Richard Milton had given him.

“That little cordial is my resource !” he soliloquized. “Now to test the doctor’s scheme — to learn what has become of the Vernon fortune. An hour’s interview with Meredith, that little phial produced, and then — *hypnotism* !” was Le Britta’s remarkable conclusion, as he entered the stately home of the man he had come to unmask.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE EXPERIMENT.

JERA LE BRITTA braced himself for a conflict, as he found himself seated in the luxurious lounging-room of Darius Meredith.

With that keen mental prescience that rendered him an accurate physiognomist, the photographer read as in a mirror the mind of his host. To outward semblance a thrifty business man, respectable and honest, from what he had learned and surmised, Le Britta was satisfied that he was a black-hearted scoundrel in reality.

Furthermore, he was assured that he had possession of the Vernon fortune.

As in a dream, Jera Le Britta in a flash went over all the details of the strange case that had brought about the present culmination.

Upon him devolved a sacred duty — the righting of a wrong, the unmasking of villainy, the disentangling of a mighty web.

All his efforts tended to the recovery of Gladys Vernon, the finding of her lover, Sydney Vance, the conviction of the real murderer, Ralph Durand, the securing of the vast fortune hidden by the dead Vernon, found by the dead or dying tramp, now held as lawful booty by the unprincipled schemer before him.

For days Le Britta had studied the character of Darius Meredith. He had slowly acquired information regarding him. He had simmered him down as a glib, smooth schemer, as a bold, defiant enemy. No amount of pleading would ever wrest money from this unscrupulous villain. It must be aggressive, yet secret cunning that would win the victory !

So firmly resolved to bring affairs to a

speedy issue, determined to make a final effort to cause the wealthy thief to disgorge his ill-gotten gains, Le Britta summed up his mysterious designs in that single expressive, and yet ominous word,

“Hypnotism!”

The photographer was no superstitious believer in the occult sciences — clairvoyance, second sight, and the like. In the mysteries of magnetism, mind-reading and mesmerism, however, he had witnessed many peculiar experiments.

He knew that a strong will could dominate a weaker one, that the glittering eye of a serpent has power to magnetize the bird, just as the diamond in the hands of the hypnotist allures the sight of the subject until visual concentration fades into a glamour of the senses. He knew, also, that when a person is mesmerized he is under the direction of the operator.

In his pocket Le Britta carried a little phial. It was to be an agent in the execution of his project in case his first resource failed. It contained a volatile preparation having the same properties as ether. Once administered, it stimulated the senses, yet befogged

the judgment. It unloosed the tongue, it sent the natural secretive instincts rioting, and developed the true hidden nature of the victim. Thus, under its influence, a miser would babble of his gold, a gambler would imagine he was playing for a stake of millions, a musical person would sing, and a solemn individual would weep.

Le Britta had determined to learn what had become of the missing Vernon fortune. This man, Darius Meredith, had received it from the tramp, undoubtedly, and had misappropriated it. It was, furthermore, probable that, having driven the tramp away and denied ever having received the money, he would not convert it immediately to his own use for fear a later investigation might trace it. He possibly had it hidden somewhere, and, acting upon this conjecture, Le Britta prepared himself to find out where.

Meredith received him cordially. He was a shrewd man. While Le Britta was cultivating his friendship diligently so as to win his confidence, the scheming wolf in sheep's clothing fancied he was getting in his clutches a new victim to pluck. Le Britta seemed to have plenty of money, he had acted the inno-

cent, inexperienced and inoffensive society idler to perfection. Meredith had invited him to his house to treat him well, to profess great friendship for him, and later, to lead him into gambling, when he would fleece him of all his available cash.

Le Britta found preparations for a pleasant evening in the cozy library. The shades were drawn, the gas brilliantly lighted, and wine, cigars and cards were near at hand. He never smoked, drank nor gambled, but, even at the risk of slight nausea, he took a few puffs at a havana, his mental excuse being the exigencies of the occasion, and was soon engaged in a brisk conversation with his host.

The latter discussed business, society and politics. Then he began descanting on the rare good fortune attending some of his recent speculations. Then he drifted to cards.

"A quiet game, once in a while, is a relaxation," remarked Meredith. "A small stake makes it still more interesting. I had quite a run of luck with the governor's adjutant a few evenings since. Won enough to invest in a new diamond pin. Am having it reset now. By the way, Le Britta, suppose we have a

round at poker, just to while the time away."

Le Britta ascertained that the conversation had reached a critical point. He never played cards, in fact, he was ignorant of the details of any game of chance. If he confessed this Meredith would probably shorten the interview peremptorily and defeat his intentions. On the other hand, if he feigned to play, Meredith would win his money, and Le Britta could scarcely afford to lose anything, even in pursuit of a cherished purpose.

"I'll try my experiment," he murmured, decisively. "Now or never!"

Meredith had arisen to secure a card-case from the side-board. His half-filled glass of wine on the table stood temptingly near to Le Britta.

Quick as a flash the latter drew the tiny phial from his pocket. Deftly he uncorked it. With a rapid movement he reached over and reversed the little bottle. Only a part of its contents fell into the wine glass, but he felt sure there was sufficient to affect his intended victim.

Meredith resumed his seat, all unconscious of this little side-play. He began shuffling the cards.

"Oh! by the way," remarked Le Britta.
"You were speaking of diamonds."

"Yes."

"Did you ever notice this ring I wear?"

As he spoke the photographer showed a small but exquisitely chiseled diamond on a finger of his left hand.

"No; not particularly."

To Le Britta's satisfaction, as Meredith turned his eyes upon the circlet in question, he mechanically raised the wine-glass to his lips and drained its contents.

He started slightly with a quick grimace, and seemed to detect the peculiar flavor of the liquor, but Le Britta hastened to divert his attention from the drugged wine by removing his finger-ring. He held the gleaming gem in the full radiance of the light, and said :

"Just keep your eyes fixed on the diamond, Mr. Meredith, and observe how peculiarly the facets reflect the light."

Now, this was a ruse. Understanding the *modus operandi* of hypnotism, Le Britta was proceeding in a line with the system adopted by its most skillful exponents. They fascinate a subject's gaze first, and then cen-

tralizing all their mesmeric strength endeavor to force the subject into hypnotic sleep.

Le Britta brought all the energy of his will to subjugate Meredith. He was disappointed at the result, however, for Meredith puffed coolly at his cigar, and there was not a particle of evidence in the hard, evil face that he was affected by either the drug or the mesmeric efforts of his guest.

Suddenly, about to turn his eyes away from the diamond with some indifferent remark as to its beauty, Meredith started.

Caused by some sudden dizzying effect of the medicine, an observation of Le Britta's steady glance or a latent taste of the drugged liquor in his mouth, Meredith shot a penetrating look at his companion.

Le Britta, engrossed in hypnotizing him, did not observe the suspicious movement. Meredith veiled his glance with a grim expression. Then, noticing the spot on the table, where half the contents of the phial had been spilled, his lips became compressed.

He fixed his eyes again on the diamond ring extended by Le Britta, the cigar dropped

to the table, he drew back, and then — his eyes began to close.

A quick flush of delight sprung to Le Britta's cheek. Not for a moment did he doubt but that the combined mesmeric influence and the drug had conduced to bring his companion under his influence completely.

"Success!" he breathed, fervently. "My man is hypnotized!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

DUPED!

"AND now for his secret!"

Le Britta arose cautiously and approached Meredith, who had sank back in his chair until his body had assumed a half-recumbent position. He imitated professional hypnotists, by making several passes before the subject; then he stroked his eyes; they opened.

The unsuspecting photographer was satisfied that his experiment had succeeded in every particular. Meredith was certainly in a mesmeric trance. His appearance indicated the fact plainly. Le Britta kept his

eye fixed upon him in silence for a moment or two. Then he directed, in a low, steady tone of voice :

“ Turn that wine glass upside down.”

Meredith put forth his hand and obeyed.

“ Arise to your feet.”

Meredith struggled to an erect position, steadying himself on the back of the chair.

“ Will you answer me some questions ? ”
was the next query.

“ Yes.”

“ You know a man named Dave Wharton, a tramp ? ”

“ I do.”

“ He was your former business partner ? ”

Meredith swayed slightly, and he hesitated a moment or two before replying. His eyes were rather clear and intelligent for a person under mesmeric spell, but he finally said :

“ Yes, he was.”

“ Have you seen him lately ? ”

No reply.

“ Did he not come to you a little over a week ago ? ”

Stubborn silence.

“ Answer ! ” ordered Le Britta.

“ He may have done so.”

"And brought a package of money? It was intrusted to your keeping. He returned for it. You denied having it. Speak!"

"Ah!"

Meredith uttered the ejaculation with energy. His eyes dilated.

"That package you must give to me. Do you understand?"

It seemed as if Meredith was about to spring upon Le Britta. His eyes glared, his fingers worked nervously. Then, of a sudden, his face resumed its vacant expression, and he murmured.

"You want it?"

"I must have it!" rejoined Le Britta, firmly. "It is in the house?"

"Probably."

"In this room?"

"No."

"Where, then?"

"Shall I lead you to it?"

"Yes."

"Come!"

Meredith started for the door, Le Britta followed him. In the hall, he took up a lighted lamp. Down a corridor he proceeded, stopped at a door, took a key from his

pocket, unlocked it, and, entering the apartment, placed the lamp on a little table in the center of the room.

Le Britta gazed curiously about the apartment. It seemed to be a sort of study or business room, for it had a desk, and, sunk in the wall of one side, a huge iron door resembling that of a bank vault. This door had the conventional combination lock and knob.

Meredith swayed dreamily. He really appeared like a man under the combined influence of narcotics and mesmeric force.

"Is it here that I shall find the package belonging to the tramp?" queried Le Britta, sharply.

The other nodded affirmatively.

"Where?"

Meredith pointed to the vault door.

"It is in there?"

"Yes."

Le Britta sprang to the door, but found it secured.

"Can you open it?" he queried, eagerly.

"I can."

"Do so."

Meredith approached the door, set the dial

against the indented disc figures, swirled it once or twice, and the door swung back.

Shelves and cases showed within, crammed full of papers.

“Go and get the package,” ordered Le Britta.

Meredith took a step forward. Then he reeled, recoiled, and sank to a chair.

His head fell upon his breast. Le Britta, alarmed at a fear of failure in his mission when so vitally near to apparent success, seized his arm roughly.

“Arouse yourself, I order you ;” he spoke, hurriedly and with force.

Meredith only mumbled a few incoherent words.

“Get the package !”

“No !”

“You *must* !”

“I cannot. *You* get it.”

“The drug has dulled the mesmeric intelligence,” murmured Le Britta, apprehensively.

“Come, Meredith ! You tell me to get the package ?”

“Yes.”

“Where is it ?”

“In the vault.”

“Where?”

“Left hand cabinet. Lower drawer.”

With an exultant cry, Le Britta sprang into the vault.

The light from the outer room illumined its dark corners sufficiently to show the cabinet described.

Toward this the photographer advanced, his heart beating high with hope.

Sudden darkness supervened. Suddenly, too, horror sent his blood curdling in every vein.

He dimly saw Meredith, his face wreathed with cunning triumph, spring to the door. There was a crash and a mocking, exultant laugh.

Then —

Announcing defeat, peril, deep, decisive, unmasking the clever rogue who had penetrated his designs and led him into a trap, a resounding echo told Le Britta that he was caged, in the toils of a shrewder man than himself.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DARK NIGHT'S WORK.

THE hypocritical scoundrel who posed before the community as a business man of probity and enterprise, and yet who was at heart a conscienceless villain, Darius Meredith, uttered a chuckling cry of satisfaction.

The ponderous iron door was shut with a crash. In a second more, click-clicketty-clack! went the tumblers shut into their lock.

"Caged!" muttered Meredith. "I suspected his game. The drug and his looks betrayed him. I decoyed him here. Aye! yell my friend, you'll bide my will, now."

Meredith sat down at the table, a muffled sound echoed from behind the iron door, but he paid not the slightest attention to it.

"I've got him safe," he reflected. "Now to think out this complication. What does it mean? Who is this man? A detective in disguise? Scarcely, for his credentials come too straight. Yet he has shadowed me—has purposely cultivated my acquaintance. He knows my former business part-

ner, the tramp — he knows that the package was intrusted to my keeping. How? Has Wharton told him? How far can they prove my possession of that money? I must think out this unexpected complication. I am forewarned. How much does this fellow Le Britta know?"

For fully ten minutes the plotter meditated, his sinister brows bent in a thoughtful scowl.

"I have it!" he cried at last, arising suddenly to his feet. "I will release Le Britta, but at the point of a revolver. He will be weak, inert, passive from imprisonment in that close vault. I will force him to tell me all he knows. Ah! what is that?"

At a window something seemed to tap — to fade in the outer darkness as he glanced thither, startled.

He ran to it, peered anxiously out, and then drew the shade closer, with the careless remark:

"The wind blowing a branch of the oak against the panes."

Then he took out a revolver. Approaching the vault, the weapon in his hand, he unlocked its door.

"Come out!" he ordered.

There was no answer.

He threw the door wide open.

"Come out, I say!" he repeated, loudly, "only, I am armed, and will shoot if you attempt to escape from this room. Hello!"

The revolver went clanging to the floor. Aghast, the plotter stood, rooted to the spot, in dismay and horror.

Across the stone floor of the vault lay a prostrate form — Le Britta.

The air-tight compartment had done its deadly work. Its victim lay motionless.

Meredith at last stooped over and turned the face of the prostrate man toward the light. Its pallor terrified him.

He examined the heart. No pulsation there.

"Mercy!" he gasped, tottering like a drunken man. "I have killed him. It is — *murder!*"

His face was the color of ashes, his nerveless hands began to tremble.

What should he do? Here was crime. Here was peril. He shuddered as the gruesome shadows about him seemed to frame

the somber outlines of a prison cell, the felon's dock, the scaffold !

Then fright, deadly fear, impelled him to sudden, frantic action.

He dashed from the room, out into the yard, into the stables. He hitched up a fast horse to a close buggy. Then back he sped to the vault apartment.

His victim lay as he had left him. He seized him in his arms, bore him down a dark corridor, out into the garden, through the stable; and, placing the limp form in the bottom of the buggy, covered it with a horse-blanket.

In five minutes he was traversing an unfrequented road leading to the suburbs. In half an hour he was in the open country.

Once he halted the horse on a rustic bridge, and seemed about the lift the body of his victim and destroy all trace of his crime by casting it over the rail to the raging stream below.

The approach of a pedestrian sent him speeding on, however. For miles he traveled a cheerless highway.

Finally he made out a dismantled structure standing back from the road. It was a place

familiar to him, a residence some years since devastated by fire.

"Just the place!" he ejaculated. "No one goes there. I'll hide the body in the cellar. It will never be discovered."

He entered the house, staggering under his burden. He reappeared bearing the blanket, glancing apprehensively back ever and anon, and hurrying on the jaded steed once again in the vehicle.

"That disposes of him," he muttered. "I did not mean to kill him. He brought it on himself. No one will ever know. What a dolt! I forgot to lock up the vault. Should a burglar enter the house and find his way to that room he might beggar me."

Utterly heartless, Darius Meredith grew almost cheerful as he neared home again. A dangerous enemy had been removed from his path. The low-souled scoundrel actually congratulated himself on his dark night's work.

He entered the house and hastened to the apartment where Jera Le Britta had battled fate and had been defeated.

The lamp still burned on the table. The vault door was still open.

Entering the vault, Meredith examined its interior.

"All safe!" he muttered, "and the package" ——

He sought to make sure of it by pulling open a drawer and gazing into it.

An awful cry escaped his lips as he did so.

"Empty — gone!" he gasped. "Robbed! The money" ——

Was not there! He reeled into the outer room. Almost fainting, he felt a cold breath of air revive his tottering sensibilities.

With a wild cry he observed that a window was open.

And then the truth paralyzed mind and heart, as it flashed across him with the intensity of a lightning shock.

During his absence some one had opened a window, and, entering the apartment, had stolen the treasured package!

There could be no doubt of it, and the plotter's heart stood still as he asked himself the question:

Had this mysterious person, as well, witnessed the crime that, proven, would send him to the gallows?

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE BORDERLAND.

THERE is no agent of death more potent and yet deceptive in its effects than that which induces dissolution by means of suffocation.

In drowning, and the results of smothering gases, no trace of violence exists. There is a certain painless fading into insensibility, and a suspension of the natural forces of the frame that is marked and alarming, even before death arrives.

The shock to the system clogs the circulation, deadens the brain, chokes the lungs. It is intense, and often, even where the victim has not absolutely reached the danger point, there seems to be an absolute cessation of vitality.

The superficial examination of his victim made by Meredith after discovering Le Britta's insensibility in the vault, tended to satisfy him that the photographer was dead. He could detect no pulse or respiration, while the bloodless lips and leaden eyelids

added a ghastly aspect to the face of his decoyed guest.

During that long drive into the country, Le Britta did not betoken one sign of returning consciousness, and when he was lifted from the buggy and carried into the old dismantled building, he lay as inert a burden as ever in the arms of his seeming assassin.

Jera Le Britta was not dead, however. That trance-like coma, that semblance of dissolution was but the lingering deadening effect of the blighted, mephitic atmosphere of the close vault.

Five minutes more confinement in that sealed safe would have resulted fatally, but as it was the precipitation of the murderous schemer saved the photographer's life, for the quick rush to the open air relieved the poison-charged arteries, and the lingering inertia of body and mind was simply the deadening after-effects of the suffocation.

Not a muscle, however, had Le Britta moved during that eventful ride, not a muscle moved as he was carried into the damp, gruesome cellar of the isolated building.

But what air, jolting and time had failed to

effect, another potent element of nature consummated.

When Meredith placed his supposedly dead charge upon the cold, clayey floor of the cellar, he dropped him directly across a pool of water.

Haunted with dread for the results of his terrible deed, and frightened by phantoms conjured by his craven mind in that dark cellar-way, the miscreant allowed Le Britta to slip roughly to the floor, and fled precipitately.

With a slight splash, the photographer's head dipped into a depression in the soft earth, filled with water. The cooling liquid laved the base of his brain, and lapped cheek and brow.

There was a deep-drawn sigh, a spasmodic flutter of the nerves, and then, like a man chained but gradually coming back to life from a dense swoon, the photographer opened his eyes.

Here and there, through breaks in the wall and from sashless apertures, the faint light of the night permeated the place. He could feel the chill, the discomfort; he could discern that he was in some unfamiliar spot, and

yet the last hideous battle for life against the invisible forces of nature in that ponderous iron vault were so strongly present in his mind that, with a shock and a groan, he closed his eyes again, believing himself still to be a prisoner in the home of the plotter, Meredith.

These are the strange, uncanny hours of existence, these moments when a person finds himself face to face with the untried, the unknown, the dim, the vague, the mysterious. It is then that the senses recoil alarmed; it is then that the soul, forced alone to battle with what the mind cannot grasp and comprehend, is revealed in its strong intensity, and man knows that the essence of immortality within him has a vivid existence and is a strong reality.

So Le Britta, at that moment still thinking that the strong iron walls of the vault enclosed him, that he was yet a doomed prisoner of villainy, awakening to a last final gasp of ebbing vitality, saw the world fade, forgot momentarily its cares and its pleasures alike, and faced the inevitable, dreamily yet tangibly.

All the good, all the bad his life had known

flashed across him mentally. The shuddering fear of death was robbed of its sting. What was a sharp pain, a choking moan, a last throe of the overwrought nerves? But *the soul!*

In that moment there came to Le Britta what comes to every good man when the final moment dawns, be it slow or sudden, announced by lingering illness or speedily as a lightning's flash—peace; rare, calm, ineffable peace.

And joy! It was hard to leave a busy, bustling, happy life, with all its brisk, enticing changes; it was hard to leave loved ones, to close human eyes on a human world, radiant with beauty, flowers, bird-song and sunshine; but the glamour of a glimpse into the portals of another life—a sudden, certain comprehension of the heaven that lay beyond the borderland, enwrap soul and sense in a delirium of joy.

Here was the Promised Land—here was the pledge old as the world, and sacred as only the word of divinity can be, that death had no sting, and the grave was robbed of victory, and life, real, final life, was vouchsafed to the man who had tried to do his

duty because he loved humanity better than his own safety !

And then, as if spoken by cherubic lips, as if two souls were wandering through space, one asking "Whither?" in the dim confusion of recent departure from earthly realms, the other questioning "Whence?" and the reply coming : "I do not know. I only died last night !" there floated on the air in fancy, a form, soul-born, a flash of words to which the senses listened as to a beautiful strain of music :

I lay with dying breath —
My wan, worn hands in groping blindness beat against a wall
Echoless, perpetual, pitiless and grim,
That seemed to close the weary round of life,
And showed no token of a void or break.
And then — a smothering heart, a last swift breath,
And I was dead, and *something* rushed apace,
And I was free ; but, lo ! through later eyes,
And newer vision, robbed of earthly bonds,
No wall was there !

Only the summer skies, the waking hum
Of insect-haunted air in myriad life,
And budding, bubbling germs that sang and swayed,
And perfume centers freighted rich.
Yet, mingling with the soul of sound and sense.
All this, and more ! and I, a formless thing,
Floated and swayed, and *rose* in dreamy joy.

Then, upward through the vapor and the blue,
Way up past clouds, and moon and stars !
A thrill of glory, dazzling realms of gold,

A sense of joy, half-rising, half sunk down,
The *something* vaulting pinion-poised aloft!
The *thinking* swirling back with eyes despaired!

And then —

I could not see myself, myself was lost,
Divided, overwhelmed, confused, for I
Was here, and yet was there, was lost, was found,
And that which of the earth had gained its life
Back to the earth's warm rest sank swift,
To long and waver through a night of years,
And dissipate and resurrect in myriad forms.
But the immortal part, shorn of its bonds,
Had soared to new identity, forgetfulness and heaven.
A soul untrammelled, blest with spiritual eyes,
A soul beyond the gates, new-born, complete!

Le Britta sighed. So near to the seeming portals of death, so blest by radiant pictures of the future, so full of faith that those he loved would be cared for by divine mercy, he seemed to knock at the gates of heaven, and long to be let in upon the flawless fields of paradise.

“Good-by, old world! I have tried to do right.”

A last murmur, a last settling back to dissolution, and then —

A harsh, discordant whistle, sharp, shrill, nerve-disturbing.

It pierced the solemn silence like the note of a bird of prey in a garden of loveliness.

Rudely shocked, vividly disturbed, Jera Le Britta opened his eyes, and glaring into the darkness and gloom, listened intently.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A NEW TRAIL.

BACK to life in a flash, back to reality, to the earth-earthy, but with an experience that would impress his mind till his dying day, the startled Jera Le Britta was roughly summoned.

With clearer senses, on the alert, he could readily discern now that he was not in the vault at Meredith's house.

No, there was a damp cellar-way, and some one was approaching, the whistle announced it, the reflection of the rays of a lantern in some compartment near by plainly indicated it.

To a man who had given up his life as lost, and had bidden farewell to the world, the revulsion of an unexpected recall to earthly existence acted as a decided shock.

Each moment the photographer's senses cleared. A thought of duty at hand. Tasks uncompleted flashed across his mind, and he

took up the armor anew of perseverance and faith without a murmur.

Meredith ! What a villain — what depths of evil in his cruel nature ! The stolen treasure ! Why, as never before, the issues of fate trembled in a perilous, uncertain balance.

“This is some cellar, the cellar of the house where Meredith lives,” cogitated Le Britta. “Scarcely, for it looks disused and dismantled. Where then ?”

That mysterious whistle was repeated, and around a corner of a stone partition the rays of the lantern again glinted across the slimy, damp foundations.

There was something sinister in that whistle, and a thought of Meredith caused Le Britta to hesitate as the impulse came to cry out.

He was glad that he checked it, for just then, as if in response to the first whistle, a second one echoed, and then a gruff voice exclaimed :

“Ah ! you’ve come at last, have you ?”

“Yes, on time, ain’t I ?”

There was the click of a watch-case and the reply :

“Scarcely. The appointment was for midnight, and it barely lacks an hour of it.”

"Well, ain't that time enough?"

"If we hurry."

"Come on, then."

"I've got a boat."

"Then we can row to the Point."

"Yes. Durand must have some mighty mysterious scheme on hand to go through all this secrecy and trouble."

"Durand!" gasped Le Britta.

That name acted upon him like a shock. He sat up abruptly; he surprised away all the lingering weakness of the moment by struggling to his feet.

Durand! Following up one branch of the case, he had accidentally stumbled across another, and both dovetailed.

These men had spoken Durand's name; more than that, they referred to some mysterious mission for which he had engaged them—a midnight task, a sinister errand well in accordance with the usual evil methods of procedure of the villain who held the key to all the mysteries and counterplots that had grown from Le Britta's championship of the cause of beautiful, persecuted Gladys Vernon.

Arranging mentally the case as it stood,

the photographer realized that here was a new diverging path in the case to follow, which might bring about great results.

The footsteps of the two men retreated, and the light from the lantern disappeared.

Le Britta started cautiously after them. At first, his progress was dizzy-headed and uncertain, but, once in the open air, his senses revived.

"They are going toward the river," reflected Le Britta. "They have a boat, and they meditate about an hour's row. How shall I keep trace of them?"

He cut across a thicket. Keeping slightly ahead of them, and never leaving a safe shelter to reveal himself to them.

The boat to which one of the two men had referred lay moored there. It was a yawl, broad and long, and rather unwieldy for those waters. There was a cuddy at the bow, and as Le Britta saw the men nearing the spot, and felt sanguine that they would make their prospective voyage on that craft, he decided on a rash exploit.

To accompany them unsuspected, would be to trace them surely to the lair where they had announced they were to meet Durand.

The photographer acted quickly. He sprang into the yawl and crowded through the little door leading into the dark and low-ceilinged cuddy.

It was close and damp, but he did not mind those trifling discomforts, although he hoped no necessity would arise for the two voyagers to explore his hiding-place.

They stepped aboard, at once took up the oars, and devoted all their energies to smoking and rowing, scarcely uttering a word until they neared a high bluff, about five miles down the steam.

The yawl grounded on the pebbly shore, the men secured it, sprang out, and one of them, with a glance at his watch, remarked:

"Just in time. Midnight. Come. It's only a few steps now."

Those few steps Jera Le Britta followed with anxious eagerness.

They led the men to an old building that resembled a residence, only that it was in a state of considerable decay.

The men went around to its side door. One of them tapped loudly. It was opened.

Le Britta, shrinking to the shelter of a

bush, saw them enter, but could not make out the man who had admitted them.

In a few minutes, however, a light showed through the chinks in the blinds.

Approaching them, Le Britta heard the sound of voices, and detected the odor of cigar smoke, so he knew that the windows beyond were missing or raised.

He cautiously pressed an eye to a break in one of the shutters.

His soul arose in arms, defiance and energy as he looked.

For he had found the missing marplot of the drama begun at Hawthorne villa, and transferred to this lonely house by the river-side.

Destiny had led him, strangely but surely, on the trail of the man he most wished to see of all men in the world.

Ralph Durand was before him !

CHAPTER XXXIX.

PLOTTERS IN COUNCIL.

AT a glance, Jera Le Britta discerned that the three men had met for an important consultation, and he prepared to listen to some enlightening revelations.

They seemed to be the only occupants of the building, and Le Britta was apparently safe from discovery, for a time at least.

"What's the row, governor?" asked one of Durand's two visitors, "that we have to come here at this unusual hour."

"Work's the row," replied Durand, sharply — "work well paid for, so you needn't grumble."

"We don't, on that score, but" —

"I generally act for the best," pursued the plotter. "You have had a remarkably easy time during the past week."

"Yes, watching the house where the girl is with the old woman so she don't by any mischance escape is no great labor," laughed one of the men.

"And she is safe?"

"She's there watched closely, and, be-

tween you and I, governor, too crushed and despondent to think of running away."

"Good!" commented Durand, "that suits me. I fancy she realizes that to disobey me would involve her lover in serious trouble. Now, then, boys, you understand enough of this affair to realize that this same lover of hers, young Vance, is no friend of mine."

"We can surmise it, governor."

"It is in my power to send him to the gallows. On the other hand, once free, he might accuse me in turn of the murder of old Gideon Vernon. He is a disturbing element in my calculations, and the only one. I have laid my plans for the future, and I don't want them disturbed, so"—

"You want to get rid of the young man in question," slyly insinuated one of Durand's companions.

"I must. While he is living and a prisoner, he is a menace to the girl. By threatening him, I keep her in my power. All this, however, may lead to troublesome complications further on, so I have resolved on one grand, final move."

"What is it, governor?"

"Money was my primal object in fighting

for my position as guardian to Gladys Vernon. To my disappointment, when I became legally appointed executor of the Vernon estates, I found them heavily mortgaged, and the proceeds had vanished. I imagine, I suspect that the girl or some of her friends know where this mortgage money is, and are keeping it in hiding until she becomes of age. However, even abandoning the hope of ever handling that ready cash, I find I can realize as much more by a bold move."

"How's that?"

"Sell the property at a sacrifice."

"Can you do it?"

"With the girl's consent."

"Not without it?"

"Scarcely. So I have resolved to marry her, and end the complication summarily."

To marry Gladys Vernon! The listening photographer thrilled at the revelation, more than that, he shuddered at the thought of that pure, beautiful girl wedded to a coarse, brutal villain, who, by thus wrecking her fair, young life, would silence her lips against him, would enforce the sacrifice under threat of doom and death for her lover, Sydney Vance.

"The day that occurs," went on the bold plotter, "I pay you each five hundred dollars."

"And how can we help you?" asked both the men in an eager breath.

"The young man Vance"——

"He is here?"

"Near here. I have held him a close prisoner. The day of the murder he pursued me. We met, I overpowered him. Since then, in one place or another, he has been my captive. I want him removed. I dare not leave him alone, for fear of escape. I dare not trust him in this district longer, for fear of discovery. To-night you are to remove him."

"Where to?"

"Somewhere among the mining towns. Surely, you have cronies, friends who know of lonely caves, isolated huts, this or that out-of-the-way spot where he will be safe?"

"I reckon we can find such a place."

"I trust you to do it. You are to take charge of him, but watch him closely."

"Never fear!"

"If he escapes, you lose the reward I have promised you. I leave him in your

keeping. Then I shall propose marriage to the girl."

"Will she consent?"

"Dare she refuse?"

"Why?"

"I tell you, the menace I hold against Vance terrorizes her completely. I may have to promise Vance his liberty—I may have to ask you to cause him to disappear mysteriously."

The villain paused and glanced significantly at the two men. Both, murderous wretches that they were, sordid, conscienceless, the yellow glow of gold obliterated the lurid stain of blood for them, were the recompense only large and speedy.

"Once I wed Gladys Vernon," continued Durand, "I am sure of a fortune. Then, a new scene of life, a foreign or a distant land, and let her friends and my foes discover what they will! come."

"Where?" queried one of the men, and all three of the conspirators arose to their feet.

Durand did not reply, but led the way from the room.

The interested and excited watcher at the

window drew into the shadow of some shrubbery.

The trio came out into the garden, Durand in the lead; they traversed its length, and disappeared in a stable.

Le Britta got around to the building, and watched, keenly.

In a few minutes a horse, attached to a covered wagon, was driven out.

This vehicle was formed of boards that inclosed all the back of the driver's seat completely, and was only accessible by two doors which opened at the rear.

These were now open, but Le Britta, peering past the corner of the stable, could see that they were provided with a heavy iron staple, padlock and chain, for locking them securely.

Further than that, he could make out the outlines of some human being lying on the bottom of the wagon.

One of the men approached the wagon and seized the doors, to close and lock them.

Just at that moment, however, Durand spoke :

“Here, Tom, Bill ! I've got a bottle in

the stable. Perhaps you'd like a sup before you start."

The man at the wagon doors abandoned his task at once, and he and his companion disappeared with Durand into the stable.

"They have a man in that wagon — Vance !" ejaculated Le Britta, excitedly.

What should he do ? Scarcely give battle to three armed foes, and he was hardly fit for a run of miles after that spirited steed.

He glanced at the stable. At its rear end, he could see the three conspirators by the light of a lantern drinking from a bottle.

They were not looking toward the wagon, and his opportunity seemed now or never.

Springing forward, the venturesome Le Britta decided on a daring exploit to ascertain the identity of the prisoner in the vehicle, and rescue him if possible.

CHAPTER XL.

ESCAPE.

LE BRITTA reached the wagon in a single bound

Whatever was to be done must be executed quickly, he realized that fully.

Peering into the close wagon-box, he could make out plainly a human form lying prostrate upon a heap of old grain bags.

He ventured the utterance of a name—a surmise as to the identity of the occupant of that dark wagon-box.

“Vance—Sydney Vance!” he gasped, softly, but with startling distinctness.

There was a rustle, a muffled ejaculation.

“Eh! who is it?”

“A friend. You are Sidney Vance?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so, listen! we have not a moment to spare. I am Gladys Vernon’s friend. I came to rescue you.”

“But those men?”

“Are momentarily out of sight. I will drag you out.”

Le Britta seized the man’s feet. He calculated on dragging him to the ground, and then, tied as he was, bodily carry him to some near retreat.

“No! no!” dissented the captive, pantingly. “I am bound.”

“I know that.”

“Hand and foot.”

“Still”——

"You are tugging in vain. You cannot drag me out."

It did, indeed, seem as if the task was impossible — as if some obstacle offered a sturdy resistance to all Le Britta's efforts.

"What is the matter?" queried the photographer, with an apprehensive glance toward the stable.

"I am also secured to a ring in the side of the wagon."

Le Britta uttered a concerned cry, but he was not yet daunted.

He clambered through the back of the vehicle, and groped in his pockets for a knife to sever the ropes securing the captive.

"Too late!" gasped the latter, suddenly.

"Eh! what now?"

"Those men!"

Le Britta uttered a dismayed ejaculation.

At just that moment Durand and his two accomplices came out from the stable.

There was no time to spring to the ground and run for cover. He doubted even if his retreat was a safe one, as he shrunk back in the darkest corner of the wagon-box.

"You understand, Tom," spoke Durand.

"Perfectly," replied the man addressed, wiping his lips.

His companion advanced to the rear of the vehicle and closed the doors with a crash, enveloping the startled Le Britta in complete darkness.

"No danger of his getting away now!" laughed the man.

"Scarcely," spoke Durand. "You have your instructions. Don't lose sight of the prisoner, and obey orders."

The two men jumped into the seat. Separated from them by only the thin board partition, Jera Le Britta tried to realize the strange situation into which his rashness had precipitated him.

His position was one of undoubted peril. He was weak, unarmed, practically at the mercy of two desperate foes, shut in to a prison-place from which escape would be difficult.

The vehicle started up. Le Britta sank to the bottom of the wagon. He groped about until he established the position in which his companion in captivity lay. Then placing his lips close to his ears, he began a hurried, undertoned conversation.

“Who are you?” queried the prisoner, in a wondering tone.

Le Britta explained sufficient to force the conviction that he was a friend.

He had found his pocket-knife now, and he set straightway about relieving Vance of his bonds.

A few deft strokes severed the ropes securing hands and feet. He untied the strong cords running to an iron ring sunk in the side of the wagon.

“You are free,” whispered the photographer. “Now, for liberty!”

“But how?”

“Wait!”

The jolting of the wagon and the grinding of the wheels masked Le Britta's movements about the interior of the vehicle. He felt at the sides of the partition, behind the driver's seat, at the bottom, top, and at the locked doors at the rear.

“We are tightly shut in,” he announced, coming back to Vance.

“Then let us wait until they reach their destination.”

“And then?”

“They will unlock the doors. We will

spring out suddenly upon them, overcome them."

"You forget — they are armed."

"But we shall take them at a disadvantage," persisted Vance.

"And they may also halt amid friends as desperate and murderous as themselves."

"I never thought of that."

"No," spoke Le Britta, thoughtfully, "our only hope of escaping their clutches safely, is to find some way of leaving the vehicle unperceived by them before they reach their destination."

"But, how?"

That was, indeed, a serious question, and Le Britta reflected deeply.

Their combined efforts, vigorously persisted in, might eventually enable them to burst open the rear doors, but the noise would disturb and warn their jailers, would lead to an investigation, and certainly end in recapture.

"Let us make a united rush for the doors," murmured Vance.

"They are strongly locked."

"But we may burst them open at a single contact."

"And warn those men, even if we succeed."

"Then it is fight or flight," returned Vance, grimly. "Come. Ready."

"Stop!"

The desperate venture about to culminate, the voice of Le Britta sounded a peremptory halt.

"What is it?" queried his companion, impatiently.

"I have discovered something."

"What?"

"A new possible means of escape. Give me time, Yes. I am positive."

Le Britta was feeling along the roof of the wagon-box.

His hand reached up; he had discovered a slight break in the sealed top.

One board, about a foot wide, had given slightly under his touch, and as he pressed it, he found that it was loose from the rear end clear to the center of the wagon.

It swayed upward about six inches, then some new resistance prevented further progress.

"I see what the matter is," he murmured.

"What?" queried the eager Vance.

"The top has a covering of water-proof. Wait. I can slit it."

By extending his knife past the loose board, the photographer was enabled to cut the outside covering.

Pushing now on the board, it gave nearly a foot, and through the opening the stars were plainly visible.

The center nail, however, held it firmly, so that it would spring back into place once the pressure of his hand was removed.

"If I hold it, can you creep through?" he queried of his companion.

"Yes, readily ; but you?"

"I will try to follow."

"Good. I am ready."

Le Britta gave some quick whispered directions to his companion.

He then pushed the board up as far as he could, and Vance, grasping the boards at the side, began to scramble through the aperture.

It was a tight squeeze and fraught with considerable peril.

Too much pressure on the board might pull the center nail loose, and although the hood over the driver's seat concealed them

from the two men, once the board broke loose, the shock and crash would alarm them.

The board shot back with the force of a lever on Le Britta's fingers, as he saw Vance reach the top, scramble over it, and drop to the road from the rear of the vehicle.

He was elated at the success of his experiment. He theorized that Vance would follow after the wagon until he had effected his own escape, when he would rejoin him.

Resting a moment or two, Le Britta started to escape as his companion had done.

A sigh of dismay escaped his lips, as he lifted himself to the aperture.

For just then he made a distressing discovery.

It was easy to get out with some one to hold the board up for the escaping person, but unaided, Le Britta vainly strove to force head and shoulders through the opening.

The board, taut as a steel trap, would not give sufficiently.

With a concerned face, the photographer dropped back to the bottom of the wagon-box:

He was fairly in a trap of his own making—he had sacrificed his own safety for that of

Vance, and his escape now depended solely on outside assistance.

CHAPTER XLI.

IN PERIL.

THE wagon had commenced to go slower, and the anxious Le Britta could estimate that they had proceeded at least five miles, and were probably nearing their destination.

He saw at a glance his mistake in directing Vance to make haste in leaving the wagon-top once free of the aperture, for had he remained only a moment to hold up the loose plank while Le Britta crawled through, both would now be speeding away to liberty.

Where was Vance? Surely, he would not leave his rescuer in peril, coward-like, abandon him to his fate!

No; a slight jangle at the rear doors told that some one was fumbling with the lock. Then the doors creaked and strained, but they remained intact, and Le Britta knew that his friend must be following the wagon under the cover of the darkness and gloom of the night.

No further evidence of the proximity of his late companion in captivity was forthcoming for nearly half an hour.

Then, in a manner most original and startling, Sidney Vance announced his fealty to his rescuer and his desperate resolve to reach and aid him, even at the cost of discovery, and an unequal conflict with the two knaves on the wagon-seat, who, all unconscious of what had so far occurred, smoked placidly and indulged in occasional conversation.

Of a sudden, something landed against the two locked doors of the vehicle with a force that split one of the panels clear in twain.

Pieces of rock and splintered wood were showered about the astonished Le Britta as that crash resounded, and the horse started up affrighted.

Instantly, too, Le Britta saw out into the road through the broken door, and discerned also that the rent thus made in the thin wood could be enlarged to an aperture of escape very speedily, were time only afforded.

“Whoa!”

The imperious command rang out, the lines were jerked, the horse shrank to its

haunches, and there was a hurried commotion on the front seat.

"What was that?"

"A crash!"

"It struck the wagon?"

"Jump down and see."

Abandoning the seat, both men sprang to the roadway, and ran around to the rear of the vehicle.

"Tom, look here."

"Mercy! what does this mean?"

Ralph Durand's fellow-plotters viewed the rent in the wagon-door agape.

"He's tried to break out!" cried one.

"No, don't you see? The damage has been done from the outside."

"But how?"

"A rock. See! the jagged ends of this board?"

"Maybe he's escaped?"

"What! tied hand and foot?"

"But"——

"I'll look and see."

One of the men drew forth a match and ignited it.

Extending it through the rent, he peered into the darksome void beyond.

“Great goodness! it’s”——

The sentence was not concluded, for as, wonder-eyed, incredulous, the startled eyes of the plotter took in the outlines of the form in the wagon, that form sprang forward.

Puff! a quick breath blew out the match.

Recoiling, the man seemed too overcome to speak.

“Tom!” he gasped.

“Well?”

“He ain’t there!”

“What!”

“No — he’s gone.”

“Gone? why — I hear him moving about.”

“Yes, but it ain’t *our* man!”

“Nonsense!”

“It’s another, and he ain’t bound.”

“Ridiculous!”

“Look and see!”

The other flared a second match. A sudden cry announced his surprise, but he was quicker to act than the other.

“Treachery! trickery!” he cried,

“It ain’t our man?”

“No.”

“It’s another”——

“Back!” yelled the man. “He may be armed.”

He, himself, drew a revolver. Excited, dubious, he extended it toward the wagon.

At that moment, from some bushes lining the road, though unperceived by the two startled men, a human hand was raised.

A rock struck the hand of the man clutching the weapon.

It fell from his nerveless grasp, but, as it did so, one chamber exploded with a startling report.

The horse, affrighted, sprang forward.

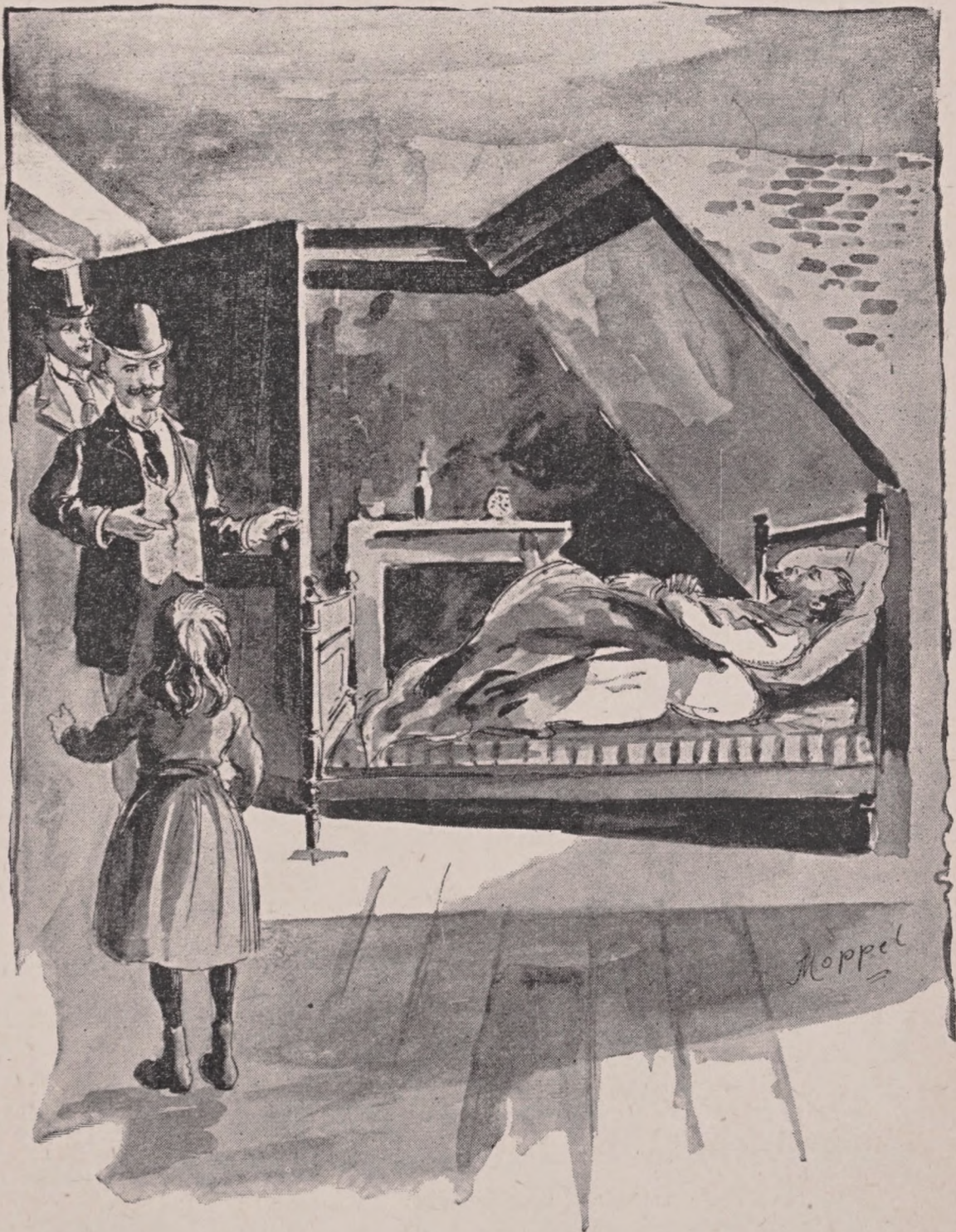
The sudden jerk sent the anxious Le Britta flat on his back. Ere he could again struggle to his feet, he realized that he was the victim of a runaway.

CHAPTER XLII.

A STRANGE COMPLICATION.

“WHOA! whoa!” yelled the two men, in unison, but their cries and their springs after the flying horse and vehicle were fruitless to stay a terrified runaway.

It seemed to Le Britta that the wagon was



P. 259.— Into the wretched hut Edna ushered them.

going at the rate of a fast express train. He was knocked from side to side of the vehicle, which tipped, jolted and jarred as if threatening every moment to come to a halt, a wreck.

He made one frantic effort to reach the hole in the door made by the rock, enlarge it, spring through it.

With the wagon dashing along at break-neck pace, however, he could enforce no systematic plan of operations, and he saw at a glance out upon the starlit road, that a fall there would be perilous in the extreme.

Even in the uncertain light of the night he could make out the winding road. A curve had shut out friend and foes alike. No houses or lights were visible, and the road seemed to be inclining steeply.

With added momentum, steed and vehicle now dashed forward. A thundering noise caused Le Britta to look out.

The wild runaway had reached a planked bridge. Half-way across it there came a shock that jarred every nerve of Le Britta's system.

There was a crash, a stumble, a loud neigh of terror, and then the horse dashed away

again, fleet as the wind, but no longer encumbered with the wagon.

That, with its human captive, had, it seemed, struck a post in the railing of the bridge. It crashed, it toppled. There was a tearing sound, and over and over it went, ripping the bridge guard from place and carrying it with it in a mad dive for the surface of the turbulent stream fully twenty feet below.

Splash !

A confused sense of peril flashed upon Le Britta's senses.

Then, as he lay a huddled heap in one corner of the box, two discoveries thrilled his soul vaguely — the current of the river was carrying the dismantled vehicle down stream, and the box was filling with water !

It seemed to eddy, whirl and totter, and gain additional velocity each moment. It careened, upset, a choking flood of waters rose breast-high, and then a second crash half-stunned the imperiled captive.

That crash announced liberty, however, if nothing else, for striking some rock in mid-stream, the battered wagon-box split clear in twain.

Exhausted, weak and half-blinded, Le

Britta managed to swim to the shore. There upon the shingly beach he lay, one hour or ten, he knew not which, for insensibility instantly supervened.

The first gray tints of dawn were streaking the eastern horizon as he again staggered to his feet.

His senses swam still, and his brain seemed benumbed. Without coherency or motive, he wandered from the spot.

Broad daylight found him nearing a collection of huts marking some poor industrial center. Into one that was deserted he staggered.

It seemed complete luxury to rest again. It seemed as if the tired senses demanded inertia, forgetfulness.

For one hour he tossed in nervous, restless dozing, then profound slumber ensued, and then, gradually, he seemed to awake, refreshed, rejuvenated, to the old practical life again.

Where was he? that was easy to figure out. And Vance and his two captors? What had become of them?

Le Britta walked to the door of the hut, Eventide! For twelve hours he had slum-

bered, while the scoundrelly Durand was consummating his evil projects, he had lain inert ! but there was one satisfaction—his victim, Vance, was probably at liberty.

Le Britta saw the lights of a little town about half-a-mile distant, and proceeded thither. His clothes had become torn, bespattered with mire, soaked in the wagon and the river, and at a small clothing establishment he purchased a new outfit.

Was he near to the center of operations of the plotters ? Certainly somewhere near here the fair Gladys was a prisoner, and the plotting Durand made his headquarters.

A meal and rest put the photographer in shape for action, and apparently action was needed in behalf of those he would befriend now if ever.

He made some inquiries at the restaurant, but its proprietor, a stolid German, announced himself as a recent arrival, and not at all familiar with the surroundings of the village or its people.

The minister knew everything, he stated, and the minister's home was down the street, "that way," and he indicated a neat cottage a square or two distant.

Le Britta proceeded thither. It would do no harm to make a few inquiries, but when he rang at the door bell of the house there was no reply to his summons, and he decided that the entire family must be away.

In a thoughtful mood, he sat down on the porch steps of the cottage.

What to do next? was the question, and a most difficult one to answer.

He had failed signally in attempting to rescue the stolen Vernon fortune from Darius Meredith. To return to that individual and charge him with attempted murder would be to meet open denial and defiance. No, he had played a bold game, and had lost, and the wily Meredith would not be taken un-awares again, he felt assured.

He had liberated Vance—that was one definite and important step accomplished. If he could only find him again!—if he could only locate Gladys Vernon, and rescue her. If he could only reunite these two, and say: “Let the fortune go—seek happiness in some other country.”

The gate clicked, and Le Britta looked up quickly. Was it the minister returned?

No, for the new-comer had arrived driving

a close carriage, and as he walked up the graveled path his attire and manner evinced nothing professional or refined.

"Are you Mr. Dane—the clergyman?" queried the new-comer, quite eagerly.

"No," sprang to Jera Le Britta's lips, but the word was checked instantly.

For, with a start, he recognized the stranger as one of the very men who had carried him into captivity in the close wagon the night previous.

Some quick intuition of thought caused Le Britta to parley with the man.

"What did you want?" he asked, simply.

"A marriage, sir," replied the man. "I wish you to officiate at a marriage ceremony at once."

CHAPTER XLIII.

AT THE OLD HOUSE.

JERA LE BRITTA tried hard to preserve a composed demeanor, as the last words of the driver of the carriage at the gate revealed to him in a flash the golden opportunity of a lifetime.

It did not require much thinking to surmise

the true condition of affairs. The man before him was one of Ralph Durand's fellow-plotters, and he had been sent hither for the village clergyman.

Why? why, but to enable Durand to carry out his previously-announced plans? Doubtlessly, the two men had hastened to Durand after the runaway accident, and had reported the escape of Sydney Vance. Thoroughly frightened, the villain had been obliged to act quickly. He proposed to hasten the marriage ceremony. He had sent this man to secure a licensed clergyman to officiate.

He did not know Le Britta, for that momentary glance through the broken door of the prison-wagon had been too fleeting to fix his features on his mind. More than that, he did not know the clergyman by sight.

"He takes me for the minister," murmured Le Britta, excitedly.

A wild suggestion entered the photographer's mind. Recent perils, a late acquaintance with exciting and unfamiliar progress of a decidedly sensational nature, had made him more reckless than usual.

Dare he assume the place of the clergy-

man — dare he accompany the man in the carriage?

What would be the result; whither would it lead him? Productive of benefit or trouble, the intrepid Le Britta was resolved to locate the imprisoned Gladys Vernon, was determined to save her from wedding the scoundrel Durand if possible.

“Ah! a marriage ceremony,” spoke Le Britta, with quiet dignity. “Where are the parties to the contract?”

“It’s — it’s quite a distance, sir?” spoke the man with marked agitation. “It’s — it’s a peculiar case.”

“It must be, to include such haste. May I ask who sent you?”

“My — my friend, sir; a Mr. Durand. Quite wealthy gentleman.”

“And the bride?”

“A young lady. Both are awaiting you. I was instructed to say to you that your fee will be large and promptly paid. In advance, if you like. Please don’t disappoint me, sir! You are the only clergyman in the district we can reach.”

“Very well, I will go,” announced Le Britta.

The driver seemed delighted. He hurried

him to the carriage, bestowed him safely within, and, springing to the seat, urged up the horses.

Jera Le Britta reflected seriously. It was easy to accept a situation, but far more difficult to face it when its issues became complicated. He saw his mistake as he cogitated over the possible results of his strange journey. When they arrived at their destination he would find himself in the midst of Durand and his friends, and probably at some isolated spot. He should have learned more from the driver—have secured police assistance—a score of theories presented themselves to his mind, now that it was too late to act.

The carriage proceeded swiftly. It must have traversed fully ten miles by lonely and unfrequented roads ere a halt was made. Le Britta was astonished as he looked from the carriage, for the spot was the self-same one by the riverside whither the boat had taken him the evening previous—the lonely house where he had sprung into the prison-wagon to rescue Sydney Vance.

Twice Le Britta was on the point of springing from the vehicle and escaping, for he foresaw nothing but trouble when he was

confronted by Durand and recognized by him, as he would certainly be. The thought that in every dilemma of the past, however, aid had come at an unexpected time, a realization of the fact that within an hour the destiny of innocent Gladys Vernon would be made or marred, nerved the photographer to proceed with the exploit in hand, at least until he had penetrated the lair of the enemy, and had learned how the land lay.

"This way, sir," spoke the driver, as the carriage halted.

It was directly at the side of the old house and near a vine-covered porch, and as he sprang from the driver's seat and opened the carriage door, he started up the steps.

"Rather dark and mysterious this, I fancy," murmured Le Britta.

"Eh? Oh! that's all right, sir. There's only a few minutes' talk, a big fee, sir, and I'll drive you home again."

"But why all this haste?" persevered Le Britta.

"Mr. Durand will explain all that satisfactorily to you. This way; just sit down for a minute or two, and excuse the darkness. I'll bring a lamp and Mr. Durand."

He pushed a common wooden chair toward Le Britta as he spoke. The latter could not see it, he could only feel it, and, groping about, he sat down and waited in painful reflection.

The door stood open, the horses and carriage were without, escape lay at hand. It was not too late yet to retreat.

He listened. Only the departing footsteps of the driver down some uncarpeted corridor echoed vaguely on his hearing.

Was Gladys Vernon in the building? Were Durand and the driver the only other occupants?

"If I only had a weapon," murmured Le Britta, "I would boldly face these scoundrels. As it is"——

He took a step toward the door. Retreat seemed prudent. Better to watch the house in hiding, than risk exposure and defeat by boldly facing overpowering numbers.

Just then, however, from the direction the driver had taken, sounded footsteps, then a light glowed, and then a quick voice spoke sharply —

"Who's that?"

"Durand's voice!" murmured Le Britta, excitedly.

"Tom."

"Ah! you have returned? Glad of it. Bill only just came back. I was afraid you might miss finding a minister, so I posted him off, too."

"Well, I've got your man."

"What man?"

"Mr. Dane, the minister at Acton."

"What!"

Durand's tones expressed the profoundest surprise.

"I say I've got the minister."

"Mr. Dane of Acton?"

"Yes, just brought him. He's in that room waiting to see you."

"Nonsense!"

"Why."

"Nonsense, I say!" reiterated Durand, forcibly. "Bill himself has just brought Mr. Dane of Acton, and he's with the bride now!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

LIBERTY !

LE BRITTA started violently. The revelation contained in the unexpected announcement of Durand fairly electrified him.

The assumption he had undertaken was about to lead him into complications and difficulties, likely to arouse suspicion and enmity at once, even if he was not recognized by the plotter.

He heard Durand's assistant whistle incredulously.

"The minister, Mr. Dane, with the bride?" he repeated, blankly.

"Yes," returned Durand.

"And I just brought him" ——

"You did not."

"From his very home" ——

"I say, you didn't!" retorted Durand, irritably.

"Will you come and see?"

"Well, I will ; but, as I know Dane, I am not likely to be mistaken."

"Then my man" ——

"I don't know."

"He must be an impostor."

"Or worse."

"Eh?"

"A spy. Hist! We'll take him off his guard."

Le Britta bristled with excitement. He glided across the room. His intention was to make for the outside door.

At just that moment, however, a gust of wind drove the door to with a slam. Le Britta sprang to the knob and seized it. A spring lock, it held firm, and he had no time to seek out its mechanism.

He dashed across the room, as in the approaching light of the lamp in the hands of one of the intruders, he made out a doorway dimly. The door yielded to his touch. He crossed its threshold, to find himself in a dark, narrow corridor, penetrated its length, passed up a stairway, and halted, thrilled and uncertain, at the sound of a familiar voice that recalled the past vividly.

"Gladys Vernon!" he murmured, excitedly.

Yes, the heiress of Hawthorne villa was certainly in the room beyond, and she was speaking.

In a low, tremulous, pleading tone of voice,

her accents fell distinctly upon Jera Le Britta's strained hearing.

He could not catch her words, but he knew that the poor girl, faced with the dread alternative of wedding a scoundrel or sending her lover to the gallows, was pouring her sorrows into the ears of the clergyman.

"My poor child!" he heard the latter speak; "this is really an unexpected disclosure. I was led to suppose that you were a willing party to the ceremony. I declare! I hardly know how to act in the matter. You say you will marry him, and yet you shrink from him. I will see Mr. Durand. I will talk with him."

Le Britta had just time to secrete himself in a shadowed niche in the corridor, as the door of the room, on which his attention and interest were centered, opened, and a flare of light illumined its threshold.

He heard the minister grope his way down the corridor and descend the stairs. He had gone in quest of Durand.

In a flash Jera Le Britta had opened the door just closed. Into the room he sprang.

"Gladys—Miss Vernon!"

In pity and concern he regarded the pale-

faced girl before him, who, with startled alarm, stood regarding him.

"You do not know me?" he began.

"No — yes — oh, Mr. Le Britta!"

Sobbing amid her despair, tottering to his support as to that of a true friend, Gladys' eyes, so full of anguish, showed a token of recognition.

Le Britta's nerves were at a high tension. He realized that the most vital moment in the affairs of the persecuted heiress and her friends had arrived; that there was no time to lose in explanations. Delay meant peril — deep, certain, disastrous.

"Miss Vernon," he spoke, hurriedly and seriously, "I understand all. Do not speak or delay. Follow me."

"Oh! Mr. Le Britta" —

"Yonder door! It leads" —

"To the garden."

"Then, hasten!"

"It is locked."

"The window, then!"

Le Britta hurried to the window in question. He raised it and glanced out. A few feet below was the garden.

Gladys had not followed him. She still

stood in the center of the room, swaying, wondering, in doubt.

"Come!" he spoke, peremptorily, almost sharply.

"You wish me to leave here?"

"Yes. We must fly without a moment's delay."

Gladys uttered a faint wail of distress and despair.

"Mr. Le Britta, I dare not!" she moaned.

"Dare not seek liberty?"

"No."

"After captivity, suffering. To remain here means sacrifice, doom."

"I cannot help it," murmured Gladys, brokenly. "Oh! you do not know!"

"Yes, I *do* know!" interrupted Le Britta, vehemently. "I comprehend, now. That scoundrel, Durand — you fear his power!"

"He threatens."

"What?"

"My lover, Sydney Vance. He is a prisoner in his power."

"No!"

"He told me"——

"Falsehoods! Sydney Vance is free,"

"Free?"

"Yes, Gladys, I beseech of you, do not delay. Hark! They are coming this way. You must, you shall escape!" -

Almost forcibly Le Britta drew the distracted girl toward the open window.

He lifted her through. The very moment they reached the ground, a wild ejaculation of alarm echoed through the apartment they had just vacated.

"Gone — the girl is not here!" rang out Durand's excited tones.

"Run — do not tremble so, I will see you safely beyond that villain's power, believe me!" breathed Le Britta as, clasping Gladys' hand, he started along the side of the house.

Looking back, however, the photographer discerned new cause for alarm.

Durand had discovered the avenue of escape of his fair prisoner, and at that moment leaped out into the garden.

A little ahead Le Britta made out the carriage that had brought him hither. The horses stood unhitched and no one near them.

"Gain that vehicle," he spoke, hurriedly, to Gladys. "Ah! here we are. Quick! Jump in!"

He tore open the carriage door, and forced the girl within. Then he made a spring for the driver's seat.

A quick hand grasped him, however, a fierce, hissing breath grazed his ear.

"You meddling impostor! Who are you?"

"Release me."

In the powerful arms of Durand, held at a disadvantage, Le Britta could only struggle helplessly.

A swirling cut on the air mingled with a thud and a gasp of dismay, and the hold of the plotter was suddenly released.

Turning dismayed, the startled Le Britta saw a form on the carriage-seat whirl the whip.

He must have just sprang there from the other side, for it was a stunning contact from the heavy whip-handle that had laid Durand prostrate on the ground.

There he lay, dazed, helpless, for the moment at least.

"Into the carriage, quick!" ordered an imperious voice to Le Britta.

"Mercy!" breathed the photographer, with wondering emphasis.

"That voice—oh! my wronged love!" murmured Gladys.

"It is Vance!" gasped Le Britta, as he sprang into the carriage beside the trembling, excited girl.

Yes, it was Vance, arrived, it seemed, just in time to turn the balance in favor of imperiled friends.

The horses leaped forward at the crack of the whip. Speeding down the road, Le Britta ventured a look backward.

"They are following—the other carriage!" he ejaculated.

"They shall never overtake us," muttered the resolute driver. "Gladys, courage! We are free at last!"

Gladys uttered a joyful cry at her lover's cheering tones. With eye, hand and whip, Vance urged forward the mettled steeds.

Suddenly he brought them to a halt, that jarred the vehicle in every spring.

"What is the trouble?" called out Le Britta, apprehensively.

"Blocked."

"How?"

"No bridge. See! the river—the shore—but the bridge is down,"

“Why?”

“We have taken the wrong road.”

“And they are in pursuit!”

“Shall we make a stand?”

“Unarmed? It would be folly.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Vance, suddenly. “Here is a road.”

He directed the horses down a rough, rutty side-road. He halted a second time, dismayed, however, for the horses reared and plunged as they were met by a formidable heap of brush piled up directly in their course.

“No thoroughfare!” murmured Le Britta.

“Then we must make a stand and fight for it,” announced young Vance, determinedly.

He had sprung from the carriage seat, and now tore open the door of the vehicle.

Gladys sprang to his arms like a fluttering, frightened dove.

“Oh, Sydney! I fear, I tremble!” she panted.

“They shall never tear you from my side again!” spoke Vance, resolutely.

“The lamp—extinguish it! That has guided those men after us,” ejaculated Le Britta, suddenly.

"Too late! they are coming this way," replied Vance.

Down the road three forms were indeed speeding. Durand and his two villainous adherents.

Hot on the chase, they had located their prey, whom the taking of a wrong road had led into a trap.

"Vance, quick! look here!" spoke Le Britta, hurriedly.

He had been investigating their surroundings, and not ten feet down a shelving bank he discovered the river rolling swiftly.

The young man was by his side in an instant.

"The river!" he cried, with a start. "I could swim, but she — ah! a raft, look!"

With a glad cry he returned to Gladys. He hurried down the bank.

Moored there was a rude raft, and across it lay a pole. Young Vance estimated the distance across the stream. It was not far, but, with some apprehension, he noted the swift central current of the river.

"They are coming," announced Le Britta, gazing down the road.

"Gladys, here, quick! aboard!"

“ Oh, Sydney ! it rocks — is it safe ? ”

“ It is our only, our last resource, my friend, Le Britta ” ——

Vance untied the rope, secured the raft to a tree, and siezed the pole. He tried to hold the rude craft stationary for the photographer to join him.

At just that moment their pursuers came up to the spot. Durand sprang boldly down the slope.

“ Rush on them ! seize Vance, secure the girl ! ” he raved, excitedly.

“ Back, stand back ! ” ordered Le Britta.

He had seized a branch of a tree lying on the beach. This he swung about his head, keeping the plotter momentarily at bay.

“ Pole out, never mind me ! ” he shouted to his friends on the raft.

There seemed no need of the injunction. The raft had floated from shore, the rope once untied. Just as it was drawn into the central current of the stream, a cry of alarm rang across the still waters.

“ Mercy ! ” gasped the petrified Le Britta.

The branch with which he had kept Durand at bay dropped from his nerveless fingers, and

the latter, like himself, abandoned the conflict to watch the raft in mid-stream.

In that mad swirl of waters the guiding oar had been suddenly swept from Sydney Vance's grasp. At the complete mercy of the rushing vortex, the raft circled, toppled, swept wildly forward.

Le Britta could see the terrified Gladys cling to her lover. The face of the latter was white with anxiety.

"They are lost!" rang from the lips of Durand as he ran down the shore, all heedless of Le Britta, to keep the imperiled refugees in sight.

"The falls!" echoed the tones of one of his fellow-plotters from the embankment above. They are doomed!"

A groan of horror burst from Le Britta's lips. He saw the raft whirl around. It was borne out of sight, it seemed to dip, it shot past an intervening rock, and when it appeared beyond, making fast and furious for the falls, the brave lover of Gladys Vernon, the beautiful orphan heiress herself, had been swallowed up by those dark waters!

CHAPTER XLV.

NEARING THE END.

“WHY ! where are the folks ?”

Jera Le Britta asked the question in a tone of profound surprise, one morning, two days after the occurrence of the tragic events at the riverside.

His face was pale and anxious, his manner grave, haunted with the grief and uncertainty that comes from solicitude, care and disappointment, and he had just reached his home door-step, and had peered through the open windows to find the usual joyous laughter of the little ones absent, the happy, gentle face of his beloved helpmate nowhere in sight.

A servant had met him with a welcoming grin.

“Mrs. Le Britta and the children have gone, sir,” was her reply to the photographer’s quick query.

“Gone ?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where ?”

“To a picnic. The doctor and Miss Maud

would take them. They have gone to Pomme-de-terre cliffs. They didn't expect you home, sir."

Le Britta smiled a trifle sadly. He pursued his inquiries sufficiently to know just where he would find them, he brushed up his rather disordered attire, proceeded to a livery stable, and was soon speeding down a smooth, broad road, intent on joining the loved ones in their brief summer outing.

It was a beautiful day, but Le Britta's heart was scarcely in harmony with its peaceful loveliness.

A deep sadness haunted his heart, a fervent grief racked his thoughts. After all his earnest efforts to aid Gladys Vernon, it seemed as if fate had ordained a terrible destiny for the poor, persecuted child of fortune.

For that scene at the riverside had found a most tragic ending. Running down its shores, endeavoring to keep in sight the rushing raft, the surface of the stream, in appalled horror, the photographer had arrived at the falls, to see the frail craft dashed to pieces on the rocks below, and its late unfortunate occupants nowhere in view.

Everything was forgotten in the disaster of the hour. Durand, white to the lips with dread, sought side by side with the anguished Le Britta for some trace of the missing lovers. Long before dawn, every member of the searching party had decided that the bodies of the refugees had been swept miles away down the turbulent river, below the falls.

Durand disappeared ere Le Britta could find heart to condemn him for all his plotting and cruelty that had availed his wicked soul naught, but had brought death to two loving creatures.

All the next day Le Britta sought vainly for some trace of them, and then, overwhelmed with grief, he proceeded to Hawthorne villa, acquainted Gladys' friends, the lawyer and the doctor with the details of the tragedy, and returned sadly homeward.

Little heart had he in festivity, but he felt that he needed the sympathy of a loving wife and friend amid his dark sorrow. He drove along the smooth country road toward Pomme-de-terre cliffs, realizing gravely that his efforts in behalf of the wronged and perse-

cuted victims of crime had failed of one tangible result.

"Gladys and Vance dead, Durand free, the fortune gone!" he murmured, depressed and sad. "It ends the case in gloom and disaster."

Pomme-de-terre cliffs was a typical picnic ground. The bluffs, the river and grand alternations of forest and plain made it doubly attractive, and even at a distance the thoughtful Le Britta could make out gay little parties of pleasure-seekers. At last, near the old rustic mill at the river he caught sight of a familiar dress, a pretty blending of blue and amber he had often admired on his charming helpmeet. He drove the horse to a shady grove, dismounted, and approached the cool spot near the river.

"Jera, old friend!"

"Dick!" exclaimed Le Britta, turning sharply as, making his way toward the river, he was suddenly challenged.

Dr. Richard Milton grasped Le Britta's hand heartily. His keen eyes scanned his friend's face, penetratingly.

"You have bad news, Jera," he remarked. "I can see it in your eyes."

"Yes, Dick," replied the photographer, gloomily, "the very worst news, but it must not distress the little ones and our friends yonder. I have no right to bring gloom upon their enjoyment."

"You must tell me, all the same," persisted the doctor; and forthwith he led his friend to a grassy knoll, where Le Britta soon related all his tragic story.

Doctor Milton listened with a grave, startled face. He could not conceal his deep distress and agitation when the photographer had concluded his graphic recital.

"Too bad!" he commented, "for I was just beginning to see some very bright light on a very dark subject."

"Concerning this same theme?"

"The Vernon case? Yes."

"I do not understand you, Dick?"

"You remember the tramp?"

"Dave Wharton? Yes."

"And his daughter?"

"Poor, brave child! I can never forget her."

"You know, when you left me, I promised to look after them?"

"Which, of course, you did,"

“Yes ; but I could not spare the time to go to the deserted cabin where they lived, and I removed them nearer home, near here, in a pleasant cottage, in fact.”

“Always kind as ever to the poor in distress, Dick !” murmured Le Britta, earnestly.

“The little one fascinated me with her patience and affection. I fancied I might operate and restore her sight. At all events, the serious illness of her father called for grave attention — I removed them, as I say.”

“And the tramp ?”

“Got decidedly better. I went to the cottage one day to witness a touching scene. The little child was kneeling by his bedside praying for him, and he was in tears. I thought it a good time to tell him all. I did so. I made him realize all you had done for him ; I made him comprehend the importance of his proving Ralph Durand the murderer of old Gideon Vernon. From that moment, he seemed a changed man. Thoughtful, silent, he would mysteriously say when I broached the subject of the missing fortune : ‘Wait till Mr. Le Britta comes back.’ One day he disappeared, to return two days later. Since then, he has been in a feverish state

of excitement to see you. Your folks wanted an outing, and I brought them here. The blind child and her father are with them in the grove yonder. I am curious to learn what revelations Wharton has to make to you, for I believe that they are important, and refer to the Vernon case."

"Alas!" murmured Le Britta, brokenly, "of what avail are revelations, now that Gladys and Vance are both dead!"

He accompanied the doctor to the little group near the river, however. There was a hearty greeting, and it was only after wife and children and pretty Miss Maud had overwhelmed him with anxious questions that he found time to speak to the little blind girl.

Her angelic face lit up with delight at his friendly tones. Her father looked like a new man in proper clothing, with the signs of his former dissipation vanished from his face, as, gravely, anxiously, he said:

"Mr. Le Britta, I wish to speak to you confidentially."

Le Britta led the way from the spot.

"It's about the treasure, the hundred thousand dollars," spoke the tramp; "you see" ——

There was an interruption. As he spoke a wild form dashed through the trees across their path.

It was that of a girl, young, pale, beautiful. With a terrified shriek she ran toward them, clasping her hands piteously, gazing back as if apprehensive of pursuit.

"Save me!" she cried, wildly, "oh, save me!"

Jera Le Britta recoiled as he regarded the forlorn figure before him.

For, wonder of wonders, the dead come to life, the grave robbed of its victim, it was —

GLADYS VERNON!

CHAPTER XLVI.

RETRIBUTION.

"SAVE me!" repeated the frantic Gladys Vernon, and then recognizing Le Britta, she tottered back to a tree, and stood there, dumfounded.

"Miss Vernon!" gasped Le Britta, "I thought" —

"I was dead? drowned! yes! yes!" interrupted Gladys, incoherently, "but we es-

caped the flood by gaining the rocks in the center of the river near the falls. But *he* is hurt — *he* is in peril !”

“He ? whom ?” queried Le Britta, curiously.

“Sidney — Mr. Vance. That man — do not let him take me — help.”

“Hello !”

There was a crash in the wood, and a form burst into view, panting, excited, evil-eyed.

With the startled ejaculation the newcomer, Ralph Durand, stared at Le Britta.

“You here !” he scowled, darkly ; “always the marplot of my destiny ! That girl ! She is my legal ward. I demand her possession.”

“Never !” cried Le Britta, placing a sheltering arm about the pale and terrified orphan.

“We shall see !” raved Durand. “Ah ! you have friends. So have I, and they are within call. What do you want ?”

About to utter a signal to his boasted friends, evidently at a near distance, Ralph Durand started back, as Le Britta’s companion advanced toward him.

His eyes fixed steadfastly upon his face, the tramp uttered the ominous words :

“ At last ! You are *the man* ! ”

At the same time he put forth a hand, as if to seize the ruffian.

“ Eh ? What’s this gibberish ? ” scowled Durand.

“ I say, you are *the man* ! ”

“ What man ? ”

“ The murderer of old Gideon Vernon ! Mr. Le Britta, I solemnly assert that I identify this man as the assassin of the master of Hawthorne villa. Seize him ! Do not allow him to escape ! ”

At the ringing words of the tramp, Ralph Durand recoiled. Pale as death, he regarded Wharton with apprehension.

“ What mummary is this ? ” he choked out.

“ No mummary, Ralph Durand, ” spoke Le Britta, sternly. “ Our friend speaks the truth. Providence has destined this strange meeting, for this man was a witness to the tragedy that robbed Gideon Vernon of his life. ”

“ It is false ! ”

“ It is true ! ”

Ralph Durand had recoiled step by step.

This accusation meaning peril and arrest, caused him to momentarily forget the object of his intrusion.

"Hold on! You do not get away so easily," spoke the tramp, springing in his path.

"Stand back!"

"No, you are my prisoner—an assassin. You shall answer to justice."

"I will not!"

There was a quick struggle. No equal in his weak, unnerved condition for the swarthy Durand, the tramp was sent reeling back from the conflict.

"Horrors!" ejaculated Le Britta, as, simultaneously, there echoed forth the sharp report of a fire-arm. "He has killed him!"

He glanced apprehensively at the prostrate Wharton, and then at the smoking revolver in Durand's hand. Had the miscreant added another crime to the long list, as a fit finale to his career of wickedness?

No, for Wharton regained his feet unhurt, but Durand, with a frantic cry of pain and alarm, reeled where he stood, toppled and fell prone to the earth.

"What has happened?" panted the terrified Gladys.

"Retribution!" pronounced a solemn voice, and Dr. Richard Milton appeared on the scene.

"Dick!" murmured Le Britta.

"I witnessed the appearance of this man. I hastened hither. He is Ralph Durand!"

"Yes."

"He has met his doom."

"Why" —

"Do you not see? In drawing a weapon to resist our friend, Wharton, he exploded it accidentally. Swearing will do you no good, my man," added the doctor, kneeling beside the prostrate Durand, who was raving wildly. "You had better be thinking of your sins, instead of adding to their enormity."

"Will I die?" quavered the shuddering craven.

Doctor Milton examined a gaping wound in the chest.

"There is no use in deceiving you. Your hours are numbered," spoke the doctor, gravely. "Make your peace with earth and heaven, for you will not survive an hour."

A frightened expression came into the wounded man's face at this statement. All the defiance and rascality of his nature seemed to ebb to the most cowardly shrinking, as he found his feeble strength pitted against that of the grim destroyer, death.

It was only when Le Britta began to talk to him that he became more calm. As the honest-hearted photographer depicted his evil deeds, the results of their enactment, the possible restitution within his power, the evil face broke in the intensity of its malignant hate.

He began to whimper, he sobbed, he broke down utterly, and then, reluctantly, with late atonement for his evil deeds, he admitted the truth of the tramp's testimony, and, in the presence of witnesses, acknowledged the fearful crime that had robbed old Gideon Vernon of his life.

Gladys shrank in horror from him, the others regarded him as a monster. Le Britta alone strove and pleaded with that wicked spirit in its last hour of earthly experience.

He prayed fervently for the soul speeding its way unshriven to the Creator whose laws it had violated ; he tried to make Durand

realize what he owed of penitence and submission and penalty to outraged justice. Saint and sinner, thus they remained until Doctor Milton touched his friend on the arm, whispering softly :

“ He hears you no longer—he is dying.”

Thus passed away the man who had caused so much woe to many human hearts, in his last moments revealing the fact that the secret he held over Gideon Vernon was a forged note, purporting to have been executed by his dead son.

The tramp and Doctor Milton, meantime, had gathered from Gladys the story of her escape from the island in the river with her lover, their flight, the pursuit by Durand and his allies, their capture, and her last escape.

They went with her to the mill, and there, guarded by Durand's two accomplices, they found Sydney Vance, a bound prisoner. He was soon released, and the two men, acquainted with the details of Durand's doom, made no resistance when threatened with arrest if they did not accompany them to the presence of Le Britta.

Like a judge on the bench, the photographer disposed of their cases. He made those

hardened villains blush for their meanness in persecuting a poor orphan girl. He showed them how their sin, discovered, had failed of any reward, and he bade them appear at the inquest the next day, under penalty of being arrested for their share in dead Ralph Durand's iniquitous plots.

There were no further festivities that day, for the tragic occurrence of the hour had cast a gloom over the little company. Then, too, the forlorn condition of Gladys and Vance required attention. Their wild flight and lack of rest and food had made them pale and fatigued, and Le Britta insisted on an immediate return to town.

What a warm welcome the desolate Gladys received from the gentle-hearted Mrs. Le Britta, and how sisterly and kind was the sympathetic Maud !

That night, like a dove returned to its cosy home-cote after storm, wreck and peril, the beautiful orphan slept as serenely under the roof of the happy Le Britta, as if housed under her own mother's loving care.

CHAPTER XLVII.

CONCLUSION.

WEDDING chimes !

Jera Le Britta laid down the book he had been reading, arranged tie and gloves at a mirror, and prepared to descend to the drawing-rooms of Hawthorne villa, as into its open windows was wafted the clear silvery jangle of

“ Bells, bells, bells ! wedding bells,—

What a world of happiness their melody foretells ! ”

Six months have passed since the day that the family picnic terminated in a tragedy, and strange and startling events have occurred since that time.

As in a dream, the photographer pausing on the broad stairway of Gladys Vernon's regal home, surveyed the throng below, reflecting on the happiness it engaged in, and thanked heaven for his involuntary part in bringing it all about.

From the hour that Gladys Vernon became an inmate of the Le Britta home, her troubles seemed to dissipate.

The identification of the tramp of Ralph

Durand as the real assassin of her father, the confession of the villain himself, and the additional testimony of his two cowardly accomplices, was sufficient to clear the proud name of Sydney Vance of every stain of seeming guilt.

The world knew the truth at last. The world impulsively bestowed the hero's crown on the brave, single-hearted man, who, for pure love of his fellow-beings, had risked life and fortune to rescue a friendless orphan from the power of a scheming scoundrel.

In his gentleness of soul, Jera Le Britta could not but forgive Durand's two emissaries, and with an impressive warning he bade them go and sin no more. To the sinister Meredith, however, he gave a stern, condemnatory lecture that checked his rascality and made him atone for the crimes he had committed.

The culminating point in the entire case was the final revelation of Wharton, the tramp. It was the production of the missing hundred thousand dollars.

His explanation was simple. The very night that Le Britta had been shut up in the iron vault by Darius Meredith, the tramp

had surreptitiously entered the place and recovered the stolen packet of which he had been robbed.

Six months past by in straightening out the tangle of the Vernon fortune, and now, with the past only a dark memory, with the future a path of flowers, illumined with golden sunshine, Gladys Vernon was about to wed the man she so devotedly loved.

That afternoon, Jera Le Britta, an honored invited guest, had taken a picture at the villa that was to be a rare memento of the photographic art, as well as a treasured souvenir.

It showed Gladys in fair bridal array, it showed brave, stalwart Sydney Vance by her side, proud and happy, in the company of the one woman he had ever loved. The tramp, the new Dave Wharton, purified by suffering, open-faced in the pride of reformation, was a lay figure in the background, where also lingered, the modest Doctor Milton, pretty Miss Maud smiling by his side.

Le Britta was compelled to officiate at the camera, of course, so he was represented by his beautiful wife and two loving cherubs.

And in the foreground, her face like that of

an angel, beaming, grateful, serene, was the little blind girl, and a new expression in those gentle eyes told that faithful Doctor Milton's patient work had brought a result, and she saw God's blessed sunlight once more, and was the happiest of all God's blessed creatures, in all the wide, wide world, that lovely spring morning !

" Oh ! what we owe you, Mr. Le Britta ! " murmured Gladys, as she placed her tremulous hand upon his arm. " See what your sacrifice and perseverance have wrought — happiness for half-a-score of people. We can never thank you ! "

" Not to me, " replied the photographer, gravely, " but to heaven we must be grateful. Its instruments are chosen and armed, and wrong will always be crucified in the end, right must triumph. I have done my duty — its reward makes this day seem like the days that will dawn, never to fade, beyond the gates that are ever ajar ! "

Wedding bells !

How they rang out. How they echoed in the ears of the joyful coterie of friends, who, at eventide, bade happy Gladys Vance a brief adieu !

The heart of Jera Le Britta was too full for utterance as they drove homeward in the gloaming.

Victory had crowned his efforts, success promised in the practical, every-day life ahead, health, prosperity and happiness were his.

To work with men, to work for men — what a glad existence! To better the condition of humanity in his daily tasks, how calm, how radiant the results!

Pinion-poised, across their path, as he reflected, a lark sprang from the heather.

Up it arched, flying straight into the face of the calm and holy stars. So the soul of the thinker seemed to soar to higher life, to nobler ambitions and impulses.

He followed the quick flight of the bird. It seemed a promise for the future, a lesson from the past.

For, amid the glory of the spangled night, the lark seemed singing at the gates of heaven!

THE END.

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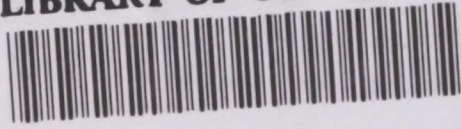
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